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A WOMAN'S WITCHERY; OR, THROUGH MUCH TRIBULATION.

BY SARA CLAXTON,

AUTHOR OF "WHICH WAS THE WOMAN?" "FOR HER DEAR SAKE," "LEAP YEAR," ETC., ETC.



"YOU ARE NOT AFRAID NOW, ARE YOU?"

A Woman's Witchery;

OR

Through Much Tribulation.

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CHAPTER I.

THEY MET BY CHANCE.

CHRISTMAS EVE, and the Grand Central depot in New York, of the Hudson R. R. R. The motley crowd of travelers of every description, of officials in uniform, civilly or uncivilly, as was their mood, trying to answer the hundred and one bewildered and bewildering questions of flurried and inexperienced people hurrying for the outgoing trains; the inevitable baggage-smashers, who, endowed with Cyclopean vigor, shoulder and toss over trunks as though they were india-rubber balls, and would rebound un hurt from no matter what collision; all this, and more, will present itself to the eyes of the reader, and make further description of the scene where our story opens, useless.

But fortunately for the interests of humanity in the shape of railway employees, there are travelers who, before they start on a journey, make up their minds not only as to what their destination is to be, but also as to the best means of reaching it.

Such travelers were, to all appearances, the two young men who drove up in hacks at about the same time, and, after a short greeting, delivered their portmanteaus, with perfect nonchalance, to a boy to carry, and made their way to a smoking carriage.

"I thought you had gone yesterday, old man," said the younger of the two, as they strolled leisurely along the platform.

"No; I managed to get out of that, thank you. Pressing business kept me in town, and the reward of my devotion to duty is that I can travel down in a smoker, and enjoy my book, instead of being obliged to entertain half a dozen ladies, each blessed with as much baggage as the celebrated wives who encountered the man going to St. Ives."

"You're incorrigible, Dugan; you're the most ungrateful fellow I ever met in my life. Any one else would have been only too delighted to have such a chance."

"I should be perfectly willing to resign in their favor," was the reply, coolly lighting a fresh cigar.

"It would serve you right if Miss Ramsden threw you over after all. If she did so, I should not be surprised. It isn't likely that a woman who has had the best *p r t i s* in New York at her feet, will put up with such cavalier treatment."

He spoke with an indignant flush on his cheek, which, from its boyish freshness, was all the more apparent.

His friend laughed quietly, and said, "Don't get excited about it, Herbert, old boy. Miss Ramsden is perfectly free to choose whom she will, as far as my peace of mind is concerned. Indeed, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to hear she had bestowed herself on some more worthy individual."

"Then why, in Heaven's name, is she invited up to your place, and the world allowed to talk about it?"

"As for the world, my dear fellow, it will talk; and she is invited up to our place because my mother has determined on a match between us, and that she will bring matters to a crisis through the opportunities presented by the Christmas festivities is highly probable."

"Dugan, it's detestable. I cannot bear to think of your acting like this to any woman. And remember, if Constance Ramsden has faults, they are the result of her training. It must be a perfect woman who would not be spoilt by all the adulation she has received."

"Don't be prosy, Herbert, or virtuously indignant. I like her well enough, and, as my mother says, I ought to marry. Miss Constance amuses me, and she is gloriously lovely; so I have no doubt that when my fate is decided I shall do the devoted in quite orthodox style. Meanwhile, I must make the most of my liberty, and am in no hurry to precipitate matters. If I could put you in my shoes, old fellow, I would, upon my soul. But, you see, the thing is impossible."

"To transform Herbert Horton, a younger son of plain Mr. Horton, into Dugan Sutre, only son and heir to banker Sutre, with a rent-roll of fifty thousand per annum, and without that transformation," he added a little bitterly, "the rest would be equally impracticable. I am not a fool, Dugan, but, by Jove! it isn't pleasant to see what one prizes so much one's self, neglected by another; and especially when that other is your oldest friend, with whom you can't very well pick a quarrel."

"I should think not, old man. Very few women would be worth that, and you will get over this infatuation soon. Remember, there are as good fish in the sea as ever yet came out of it."

"Apropos of which," said the other, willing to give the conversation a turn, "just look there."

He pointed to two figures just passing the car, at the door of which they were standing.

They were those of an elderly man and a young girl, both of striking appearance, and evidently, from their mutual resemblance, father and daughter.

The girl was the one who had attracted their attention, and that of many others who could spare time from their all-engrossing occupation of worrying the train hands.

She was a slim, graceful girl, of medium height, with a face which was only equaled in beauty by the perfect symmetry of her form, set off to perfection by the dark, closely-fitting ulster which she wore.

The regularity of her clearly-cut features, the soft, melting, dark eyes, (whose beauty was enhanced by their long, drooping lashes,) were set off by her peculiar complexion, which was of a clear ivory white, scarcely relieved by the faintest tinge of color.

Her hair was dark, but had a sunny gleam here and there, where it fell in graceful, wavy curls over her forehead, or round the delicately-formed shell-like ears.

She was speaking to her companion as they passed, and both listeners were thrilled by her musical voice.

"I shall come back at once when you return, papa," she was saying. "I won't have you shut yourself up alone in this great city."

"Never fear, my darling," he replied, with a proud smile at the beauteous, winsome young face beside him. "I am afraid your old dad is too selfish to do without his darling, even when she is enjoying herself with all her country cousins."

"I mean to enjoy myself, but I shall be longing for you all the same, and quite ready to come back again."

"Now she is trying a little bit of flattery, and wants to make believe that she will be glad to leave all the young folks, and come back to an old foggy like me."

The shriek of the engine, which warned them of the speedy departure of the train, prevented a reply.

In a few moments the long line of cars rolled slowly out of the station, and our two male friends saw a small gloved hand wave a farewell from the one next to their own to the gentleman, who remained on the platform looking after the train as long as it remained in sight.

It was past seven before the train drew up at the little station at Raybourne; but the moon shone so brightly on the gleaming snow, which lay, soft and thick, all around, that it was quite possible to distinguish every object; and as Dugan Sutre lazily roused himself from the doze into which he had fallen when his

friend left him, he saw the lady who had attracted his attention before starting talking earnestly to the station-master.

"You are sure there is no one here?" she said, interrogatively.

"Quite, miss. Mr. Challoner drove in to meet the midday train, but there hasn't been any one since."

"They must have misunderstood my letter," she said, looking perplexed. "Is it very far from here?"

"Nigh upon three miles, miss. You couldn't walk through the snow."

"Three miles! Is there any conveyance about here which I could hire?"

"I am afraid not, miss. It just happens there is no one here to-night from over there except Mr. Sutre. I see his dog-cart outside."

"Well, I suppose I must walk, then, with the hope of meeting some one on the way."

"If you will allow me, I shall be very happy to be of service to you."

The voice was courteous and pleasant, and looking up, she saw a tall, manly figure beside her, enveloped in a long ulster, and with a warm traveling-cap drawn over the face. She bowed slightly as the stranger continued:

"From what I overheard, I see you are bound for my friends the Challoners; so that by assisting you I shall have the double pleasure of also obliging them. I have only a dog-cart here, but if you do not mind riding in that, I shall be very happy to drive you to the Rectory."

"Oh, thank you, it is very kind; but I fear I shall be giving you so much trouble."

"Not at all," he answered, promptly. "Our houses are quite close together, so that it all lies in my way."

"Then, in that case I shall be very much obliged if you will take me with you," she said, with evident relief, and without the slightest awkwardness or self-consciousness—a fact which Mr. Sutre noticed with satisfaction.

"This is your first journey into this part of the world, I presume?" he said, when they had mounted and were starting off.

"Yes," she answered; "I have only been in the United States a short time, and my cousins were anxious for me to spend my first Christmas here with them."

"The Challoners are your cousins, then? You can scarcely have met them before, if this is your first visit to our country."

"No; they are all strangers to me as yet, excepting by their letters, and from papa's descriptions."

"Well, you are not likely to be disappointed, however brilliant the expectations may be which you have formed. I know no family which one can admire and like so heartily. Mrs. Challoner is a model old lady, and John my beau ideal of a parson."

"I am so glad to hear you say so, for I had imagined them just as you say. And when I found myself deserted in such an awful way, I began to wonder if they were myths, after all."

"By no means. And now, as things turn out, I at any rate am rather grateful to them for neglecting you, as it has given me the pleasure of making your acquaintance much sooner than it would otherwise have been, and in a delightfully unconventional way."

"You certainly have proved a friend in need," she said, brightly. "It seems quite like a fairy tale to be bowled along so briskly, when I had contemplated having to trudge through the snow, losing my way, and arriving at my destination something before midnight."

"Having fulfilled one part of the adage, I mean to do my best to accomplish the rest," he said. "I hope you will allow me to prove a friend indeed. You will see me very often down at the Rectory. Mrs. Challoner always allows me to drop in just as I like, a favor I often avail myself of."

"I shall always be very glad to see you," she said. "I felt a little bit nervous at com-

ing among so many strangers, for I have never left papa before, and it is so pleasant to think that I have made one friend already."

They chatted as naturally as if they were old acquaintance instead of strangers who had met that night for the first time, and so quickly did the time pass that they had done more than two-thirds of the journey without feeling the slightest constraint.

Then, just as they passed a sharp turn in the road, the sound of wheels smote their ears, and Mr. Sutre said, "Here comes the truant at last; I wonder what he will have to say for himself."

A few moments more, and a depot-wagon appeared, the driver of which seemed a very Jehu.

"Whither away so fast, John?" called out his friend; "you might stop to wish a fellow a merry Christmas."

"I didn't see it was you, old fellow," called out the other. "But don't stop me now, for I ought to have been at the station half an hour ago to meet my cousin, Miss Weston. I had an accident on the way with the mare, and had to turn back, and I expect the poor girl is waiting there in the cold, thinking all manner of things about us."

"I rather think you will overshoot the mark if you are in such a racing hurry," said the other composedly. "What should you say to me if I tell you the distressed damsel has found a knight to redress her wrongs?"

"Have you really brought her with you?" exclaimed Mr. Challoner. "Well, I am glad for your sake," he continued, perceiving his cousin now in the dog-cart. "And I am very much obliged to you, old fellow, for making up for my remissness. Welcome to Raybourne, Cousin Ida," leaning forward to shake hands; "my mother and Mabel are longing to see you, and beg that you will not take this as a sample of the way in which we are going to treat you."

"Thank you. I am also longing to see them, and don't feel put out at all about my treatment. Now the matter has turned out so well, and I have nearly reached my haven, I am rather inclined to be amused at my little adventure."

John Challoner turned back with them, and after a short time they entered the Rectory gates.

The lights shone cherrily in all the windows and through the open door where, at the sound of wheels, two female figures had appeared.

Ida Weston caught a glimpse of a snug hall, tastefully decorated with evergreens, and lighted up by a roaring log fire.

"I suppose I must give up my charge here," said her escort, as they drove up to the door. "But I shall hope to see you again tomorrow."

"Won't you come in, Sutre?" asked John Challoner.

"No, thank you; I had better say good-night here. It is Christmas Eve, and my people won't like it if I am late. A merry Christmas, Mrs. Challoner, and to you, Mabel. You see I have brought your lost lamb quite safe and sound."

There was the hubbub going on generally attendant on an arrival, and as John Challoner lifted his cousin down from her seat beside Mr. Sutre, she was beset by questions and commiserated on all hands.

"But now you are arrived, come into the warm room, my dear," said Mrs. Challoner, leading the way to the cosy, prettily-furnished drawing-room, whither Ida, having taken leave of and again thanked her charioteer, followed.

It was so pleasant to meet with such a hearty welcome that her eyes filled with tears as her aunt, with motherly tenderness, helped to remove her wraps, and Mabel pressed her hand, saying, shyly: "We will be great friends if you will let me, cousin Ida. I am so glad to have you here."

"Let me look at you, dear," said Mrs. Chal-

loner, as, all the wraps and furs being at length removed, her niece stood enjoying the bright glow of the fire and warmly responding to Mabel's affectionate advances.

She turned round quickly, and let the full light fall on her features, and certainly the result was one which should have satisfied the most fastidious of beholders.

But Mrs. Challoner, who regarded her intently, as though seeking some resemblance to her dearly-loved sister, Ida's mother, said, with a slight tinge of disappointment: "You are not at all like your mother, dear child."

"No, I am afraid not. Papa has always said so."

"As long as you resemble her somewhat in character, darling, we will not mind about the appearance. I have let you have her room, as I thought you would like it better than any other, although it is very small. Mabel sleeps there generally, but she was very willing to give it up to you."

"Thank you so much! Oh, auntie, you are kind to me; I feel I shall love you dearly."

"I hope so, darling; and even were I not kind for your own sake, I should be for your mother's. She was my only sister, and more like a daughter, for she was much younger than I, and our mother died when she was born."

"Yes, dear aunt. Papa has always told me of your goodness to her and to him, too. He sent his love, and is so sorry that he was unable to come to you, but hopes to do so later on."

As Ida was left alone in her room that night, she looked round on everything it contained with deep interest, and tried to imagine to herself the young girl-mother whom she had never known.

Mrs. Weston had gone to Cuba directly after her marriage, and had died in giving birth to her first child.

Her husband, who was of Cuban origin on his mother's side, had remained abroad since that event, and only brought his daughter to the States for the first time in her life that spring.

He had come to New York to collect documents for a book which he was writing, and had not been able to spare time to accept the oft-repeated invitation of his wife's sister for himself and daughter until this time, and now, at the last moment, pressing business in connection with a small property which he had in the South called him away, and, much to her grief and his own, Ida was obliged to pay the long-promised visit alone.

In spite of his protestations to John Challoner, that his people would not like it, Dugan Sutre did join the family party on Christmas Eve; but he did not hurry himself in doing so.

He lingered idly over his dinner, which he took in solitary state, the rest of the party having already repaired to the drawing-room, and made little effort to overcome the distaste which he felt for having so to do.

He was a man of refined, studious habits, and had little pleasure in the ordinary small talk of society.

It bored him, and he had fostered instead of having discouraged this feeling, by withdrawing himself at times almost entirely from his fellows, and wandering about in unknown but beautiful or interesting regions, or spending his time in study and writing.

He was universally considered eccentric, but there was a charm in his manner that made him a great favorite whenever he chose to come out of his retirement and mingle in society.

Although blindly devoted to him, his mother, a thorough woman of the world, was greatly troubled by his unsettled habits, and looked forward to his making a suitable marriage, which she trusted would introduce an element of repose into his life.

The only son and heir to a large estate and influential position, he felt that it would be incumbent upon him to marry; and yet, although in the course of his wanderings he had met many women who had excited a feeling very

near akin to love, he had never met the woman who entirely satisfied his fastidious taste.

He had begun to grow rather cynical on the subject, and told himself that, having nearly reached his thirtieth year without loving or meeting a woman he could love, he must console himself for his want of the romantic element by making a highly prudent and conventional marriage.

Thus he was in some respects willing to fall in with his mother's schemes concerning Miss Constance Ramsden.

This lady was beautiful, witty and well-bred, and would worthily fill the place as head of his stately household; and yet his own innate good feeling made him shrink from a marriage of the sort, and had caused him to feel the truth of his friend's reproaches, although he had tried to laugh them off at the time.

This evening he felt his old scruples with greater force than ever, and as he sat moodily smoking, his glass of wine untouched before him, he felt he would give up much to have been able to spend that evening under some other roof than that which sheltered Miss Ramsden.

"I wish I had accepted Challoner's invitation, after all," he affected, as at length he rose to go, unable to defer doing so any longer.

The drawing room was full of people, and he paused for a moment on the threshold, and looked toward his mother, who, arrayed in a rich black velvet dress, did the honors with queenly grace.

There was a deep affection between these two, despite many radical differences in their dispositions and the little outward show; and as he looked at her now he reflected with deep pain the grief it would give her should he again start off on his travels without settling down at home, or bringing her a daughter whom she might look on with pride, and who might fill the place of her own little daughter, who died just as she began to blossom from childhood into maidenhood.

Constance was near her, and looked beautiful and fascinating enough, as she bowed her stately head in response to Mr. Sutre's greeting, to satisfy the requirements of the most exacting of men.

She was one of those women who are peculiarly the product of the upper circles of society. Tall, graceful, and beautiful, with that voluptuous yet well-trained beauty which seems to spring as much from perfection of breeding and surroundings as from physical charms, she united the culture of a well-educated woman, always used to the society of refined people, to the natural aptitude and sparkling wit which rendered her society fascinating and dangerous to many men who would have fain aspired to try for so beautiful a prize had she not been so far beyond their reach.

All-powerful as she was with other men, she always felt her weakness before Dugan Sutre—a feeling which piqued her pride as much as it pained her heart, for whatever of that commodity Constance had ever possessed, she had undoubtedly bestowed on this unwilling suitor.

It was not that she ever feared he would disregard his mother's wishes, or resign the convenience and propriety of a marriage with herself; but somehow this did not content her, and she laughed scornfully at her own romantic folly of longing that when he should ask her for her hand, that he might also show some eagerness that the heart should accompany it.

To-night his manner, if possible, was more courteous, and yet colder than ever; and she strove in vain to fascinate him by those graceful little wiles which had brought nearly every man who crossed her path to her feet.

"Your train was late, I presume?" she remarked, as he seated himself near her.

"Not very, considering the season," he answered. "I have been round to Challoner's on my way from the station."

"Oh, then you have probably seen the Cuban cousin of whom Miss Challoner has so much to say just now? Do tell me about her? I am dying of curiosity."

"I have traveled down with Miss Weston, and had the honor of driving her to the Rectory, as an accident happened which prevented her friends sending for her in time. I am sorry not to be able to satisfy your curiosity, as there was nothing so extraordinary in Miss Weston as to impress me very forcibly, unless it be her decided beauty and ease of manner. However, you will be able to judge for yourself to-morrow, as I suppose she will join the Challoners' party here at dinner."

"And you drove her home from the station, then? How odd! But, of course, you had met her before in the city?"

"I had never seen her before, but in my opinion there was nothing odd in my offering my services when I discovered the dilemma she was in."

"Oh, no; of course not, if you put it like that; but I wonder she liked to go with a perfect stranger."

"I introduced myself as a friend of Challoner's; but even if that had not been so, I should have felt it incumbent on me to offer my services, as I was the only one with a conveyance there."

"Certainly; but it was much more interesting that the distressed damsel was possessed of remarkable attractions. I certainly did not know that you were a knight-errant, but I assure you the new role is wonderfully becoming."

She did not know why she should be piqued by his attention to the Challoners' cousin, and told herself that she must indeed have fallen low to fear the rivalry of a music-teacher, or even professional singer, as she had heard that Miss Weston was; but still the annoyance she secretly felt made her railery a trifle more sarcastic than her own worldly knowledge told her was compatible with good taste.

CHAPTER II.

PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES.

"Of course you heard of your son's romance, Mrs. Sutre," said Constance Ramsden, as they set out for church the following morning. "I suppose we shall have the pleasure of seeing the young lady to day!"

"I am quite in the dark as to your meaning, my dear," replied the elder lady. "Dugan has not made me his confidant."

"Has he not told you that he drove Miss Weston, the Challoners' cousin, home last night? He found her dissolved in tears, or, at any rate, in great distress, at the station, not knowing how to proceed on her journey, having, I expect, either missed her train or made some other absurd mistake. I don't know whether she appealed to his protection or if he first offered it, but at any rate he drove her to the Rectory."

"How very strange! Young girls really should not travel alone. She ought to consider herself very fortunate in having met with help."

The Rectory party had not arrived when they got to the church; and two pair of eyes often wandered to the little door in the chancel by which they would enter, although both owners would scarcely have admitted that they felt any extraordinary interest in the matter.

Constance Ramsden felt, with the certain instinct of a woman, that Miss Weston was, or would eventually be, her rival, and was, therefore, anxious to see her; while Dugan Sutre had found that the refined, delicate face of his traveling companion had fixed itself indelibly on his memory, and he felt a more than ordinary anxiety again to meet its owner.

Both the watchers were disappointed, as Mrs. and Miss Challoner walked into the church alone, and Mr. Sutre regretted that he had allowed himself to be beguiled by a false hope into leaving his comfortable study for the little draughty church and the torture of rural attempts at music.

But neither was to be disappointed after all,

for, after a few moments, again the little door opened, and Mr. Challoner appeared, accompanied by Miss Weston.

"Looking lovelier than ever," reflected Mr. Sutre, as the plainly yet tastefully-clad figure glided past him with a slight smile and bow of recognition, a touch of color brightening the habitually pale cheeks.

"Is that all?" reflected Miss Constance. "She is lady-like and pretty, certainly! but a beauty?—oh, no! Mr. Dugan must have been deceived by the moonlight."

The service commenced, and was like most services are in country villages; and yet Mr. Sutre, whose patience was generally tried by this ordeal, did not find himself at all wearied.

Certainly when the cracked voices of the village choir raised a melancholy sort of wail, entreating the congregation to "Hark! the herald angels sing," a noise which was suggestive of anything but angels, he felt inclined to make a bolt of it, and could not help responding to the smile which wreathed the full, beautiful lips of Miss Ramsden, and showed off her gleaming white teeth to advantage; but after the first few bars, the rustic singers increased in confidence, and made up for the deficiencies of their performance by its heart-felt earnestness.

Then it was that a full, rich, contralto voice arose, filling the little chancel with glorious melody, insomuch that it made the other singers pause, and to fancy that it was indeed an angel's voice which they heard.

Dugan Sutre, whose ear was fine and correct, was enchanted, and listened with rapt attention, scarcely less touched by the beautiful expression of the singer's face, as Ida Weston, heedless of the notice she was exciting, joined in the fine old Christmas hymn heart and soul.

The service over, a group soon formed outside the door, and good wishes for the festive season were heard on all sides.

Mr. Sutre at once made his way to Ida, and inquired if she were fatigued from her journey.

"Not at all. I am so interested and pleased with everything, that even were I tired I should not have time to feel it."

"Of course we shall see you with Mrs. Challoner at our house this evening?" he asked. "If this frost continues, you must come to-morrow for some skating. We shall have a large party on the ice."

"I can't skate," she said. "This is the first time I have ever seen ice; but I shall like to look on. I saw some boys on the ice this morning, and it looked very enjoyable."

"Oh, but you will soon learn, and I shall be delighted to teach you."

"Thanks; I am afraid I should be too nervous."

"Won't you introduce me to your cousin, Miss Challoner?" asked Miss Ramsden.

"Oh, certainly! Ida, dear, this is Miss Constance Ramsden—Miss Constance, my cousin, Miss Weston."

They bowed, and Miss Ramsden said, graciously:

"Miss Challoner has told us so much about you that I seem to know you already, and directly I heard your voice in church I knew who it was. You quite surprised the aborigines, I think."

Ida smiled, and said:

"I did not notice any great astonishment among them."

"Ah, that was your modesty. I am a little bit musical myself, although a very humble amateur; so if Mrs. Challoner will allow me, I shall pay a visit to the Rectory, and we will have some music together."

"I shall be delighted!" said Ida, pleased at the decided friendliness of her new acquaintance.

Constance had decided to take the bull by the horns and make a friend of her rival; for her feminine instinct told her that she would by so doing be better able to fight her battle; and all the way home she sung Ida's praises.

"She is really a pretty little thing; don't you think so, Mrs. Sutre? Of course she is foreign-looking, but that makes her uncommon among our buxom, rosy country lasses."

"I don't wonder at your enthusiasm," she continued, as Mr. Sutre held the gate open for her to pass. "Her voice, too, is lovely. If it sounds as well in a large room as it did in the church, she certainly ought to succeed in her profession."

"I was unaware that Miss Weston was a professional."

"Oh, yes; I think so. Miss Challoner told me something about it. She said the father is a very delicate man, and Miss Weston had always been anxious to be a help to him. But considering her great abilities, I dare say her natural longing for admiration would make such a duty a very pleasant one to her."

As Constance Ramsden dressed for dinner that night, she chose one of her most becoming toilets; and certainly the effect was satisfactory.

As she entered the almost empty drawing-room Dugan Sutre thought he had never seen her look more beautiful.

She wore a long train of terra-cotta velvet, with a tunic of satin of a much lighter shade, the bodice being so cut as to show off her magnificently-formed arms and shoulders to every advantage.

"You are early this evening, Miss Constance," he remarked, placing a chair for her near the fire.

"Not earlier than usual, I think. But it is so seldom that Mr. Sutre honors us with his company so long before dinner that he lays the blame of tardiness on me."

She knew what had called him from his retirement so soon, and it nettled her to fresh efforts. She determined that at least he should not speak to Miss Weston before dinner, and as he would take her, not Miss Weston, in to dinner, she thought that it would not be a difficult matter to keep him at her side for the rest of the evening.

"I want you to tell me the story of that picture in the library whose history you promised to relate to me when we were in New York. You interested me in it, and I now long to know all about it. There is a fire in the room where it is; will it be too much trouble to come and tell me now?"

"Trouble is out of the question where Miss Ramsden is concerned," he answered, gallantly, at the same time looking uneasily at the door. "If you are really desirous of knowing the story I will tell it to you now."

She took his proffered arm, saying gently: "I don't know what I have done to offend you. At one time I thought I might reckon you among my friends."

"And what have I done to lose that privilege?" he asked.

"You have done nothing; but you make me feel like a naughty child who is in disgrace. When we were in New York last season scarcely a day passed without our meeting, and now, that we are in the same house, we scarcely ever speak together. I shall begin to think that you are very changeable, and do not care about old friends."

"That would be very cruel."

"Now you are sarcastic. But perhaps I was premature in reckoning myself among your friends?"

"I shall be always proud to be counted worthy of such an honor."

"Of course you say so, and no doubt I am stepping beyond the strict bounds of propriety in venturing to reproach you; but you are so different from other gentlemen of my acquaintance that I can venture to speak more frankly to you, and I had determined not to let any misunderstanding spoil such a pleasant relationship."

"I should be very sorry to do anything to lose your good opinion," he repeated.

"Well, then, please don't leave me to the tender mercies of Captain Barnes, who has nothing to say, but 'Ah! weally, my deah Miss Ramsden; how vewy funny!'"

Constance's mimicry of the coxcomb's manner of speech was so exact and clever, that Mr. Sutre could not help laughing and feeling a little flattered at her preference for himself. "She is beautiful!" he reflected. "I wonder why I can't love her."

For the time being, at any rate, she had succeeded in fascinating him, and as she listened with intelligent sympathy to the old family history she had asked for, he almost forgot the party whose arrival he had been so anxiously expecting.

When they returned to the drawing-room the dinner had just been announced, and he had only time to greet the strangers before they paired off to the dining-room.

Miss Weston, who had fallen to the lot of a very young and bashful man, was just in front of Miss Ramsden and himself, and when he found that their places were so arranged that he was just removed from her by Constance and the bashful young man, it must be confessed that for the first quarter of an hour he felt exceedingly morose and uncharitable.

"Stupid idiots!" he reflected. "She will be bored to death."

When, however, after a short time, he found that instead of allowing herself to be bored, she was talking with gentle cheerfulness to the shy young man, he was more annoyed than gratified at the disappointment of his predictions.

"I suppose she is one of those girls who cannot help trying to elicit admiration from every man that they meet, even though he be the veriest dolt," was his mental comment, and turned round to devote himself to his partner with an ardor which surprised her.

Every now and then he looked at the couple beside them, and listened to their conversation, which was becoming quite animated, the bashful young man having quite thawed under the gracious sunshine of his beautiful companion's smile, and the drawing-out process to which she subjected him.

"Insolent young puppy!" thought his irate gentleman-ship, as Ida Weston's beautiful eyes looked encouragingly at the young fellow, who was evidently fast losing his heart to her.

Nursing his ill-humor, Mr. Sutre was one of the last to leave the dining-room, and as he did so, the passionate strains of "Che faro senza Eurydice?" came from the drawing-room in a rich, glorious voice, which he soon recognized.

Before entering the room the song was ended, and Ida Weston was standing beside Miss Ramsden, looking through some music.

A stronger contrast it would have been impossible to imagine.

Mr. Sutre thought he had never seen anything more exquisitely refined and delicate than the slight figure of Ida Weston draped in black lace, without the relief of a single piece of frilling, the soft, rounded arms looking all the whiter and smoother from the somber hue of the transparent sleeves.

Her abundant black hair was combed straight to the top of her head and twisted into a massive coil, in which lurked a few dark crimson berries, the only color which she had about her.

She glanced up with a smile as he entered, and for a moment he almost believed that her cheek was tinged with a slight shade of color.

At any rate, such a pleasant supposition had the effect of melting the gloom which was oppressing him, and he at once went up to her side.

"I am so sorry I missed your song," he said. "Will you not sing again for my benefit?"

"Presently," she answered. "Now people want to talk, and my performance would only disturb conversation."

"Come and talk to me then, please. Here is a delightful little corner, and I have some photographs I want to show you. They will interest you, I think, as I got them all in Italy."

He led her to the place indicated, and spread

out the volumes before her, but seemed rather inclined for talking than inspecting them.

"I am afraid it was very dull for you at dinner," he said. "That fellow must have bored you awfully."

"Not at all. We got on capitally after the first shyness wore off."

This was a decided check to his returning good humor, and he said, "Perhaps I had better vacate my place to him now, since his society is so enjoyable?"

"I don't think I said it was enjoyable," she said, gently. "There is a great deal of difference between that and being wearisome."

There was a certain dignity in her manner which recalled him to himself, and he said, penitently, "I am very rude; pray forgive me. But remember, you have promised to be my friend."

"I do not wish to forget it; but that need not prevent my having others."

"Not if you promise to like me best. Will you?"

She colored deeply, and looked intently at the pictures before her, trying in vain to make some suitable remark about them.

"I am afraid I have offended you again," he said, in a low voice. "Tell me is it so?"

"No; not exactly offended, but—"

"Well, but what?"

"Please don't say such things any more. I don't think it is quite right."

"Why not, if I mean it? You promised me your friendship, and must allow me the privileges of a friend."

"Miss Weston, will it be troubling you too much to ask you to sing this duet with Mr. Forrester?" asked Constance Ramsden, coming up at this moment. "You know it, I think, and we want so much to hear it."

Mr. Forrester was the bashful young man; and Mr. Sutre, angry enough to have the *tete-a-tete* broken up, became angrier still when he knew the real cause.

CHAPTER III.

CROSS-PURPOSES.

"WHAT a splendid day for the ice!" cried Mabel Challoner, the next morning at breakfast. "Of course you will come, Ida? Mrs. Sutre asked us all, and there is sure to be a large party."

"I cannot skate," said Ida. "Besides, cousin John promised to introduce me to some of his old people to-day."

"Oh, John will come on the ice too; won't you, old man?"

"Certainly when I have been into the village," said he. "I must go there first, and shall of course be very glad of your company, Ida; but don't come simply to keep to your engagement. I am sure the ice will have greater attractions."

"Not at all," she responded. "I shall only get cold if I stand about too long, and I really want to go with you. I shall see plenty of the skating if I go when you do."

"So be it," said John, looking unmistakably gratified. "I cannot be so unselfish as to try and dissuade you, although I fear it will be rather dull for you."

There was, as Mabel had predicted, a large party when Mr. Challoner and his cousin arrived at the river some two hours later on, and Ida uttered an exclamation of delight as she stood still to take in the effect of the picturesque scene.

Pure, spotless country snow lay sparkling with myriads of crystals as far as the eye could see, while the feathery branches of the trees, incrustated with hoar-frost, formed an exquisite screen, through which the golden sunlight poured on the gay, motley group of skaters lithely and gracefully gliding over the frozen bosom of the water.

"It is beautiful," she cried. "I have never seen anything lovelier. I wish I could skate, too."

"You must let me teach you," said John. "I dare say we can soon borrow a pair of skates."

"Oh, no, thank you! I would rather look on. I dare say the reality would not be so pleasant as I imagine. But don't let me keep you. I want to see you enjoying yourself also."

"I am," he replied with a significant smile. "Your enthusiasm is infectious."

"There is Mabel!" cried Ida. "How beautifully she moves! Who is that young fellow she is skating with? I don't think I know him."

"Oh, that's young Herbert Horton. He is a fine young fellow, and a great favorite of mine."

"And of Mabel's too," thought Ida, shrewdly, as she watched the pair glide, hand-in-hand, over the ice and under the drooping boughs of the trees.

She stood eying the scene with appreciative looks, while John busied himself with his skates, and having screwed them on, raised himself to his feet, and left her to herself.

But presently another figure came toward her, and a familiar voice was heard to say, in reproachful tones, "At last! I have been looking for you all the morning. I shall begin to think you want to make us feel the worth of your company by giving us as little of it as possible."

"That is not very charitable," she answered, lightly. "I had promised before to go with John, and as I can't skate, I should not care to stand here too long."

"But you are going to skate," he said, decisively.

"I have no skates."

"But I have"—going toward a heap of rugs and chairs on the bank, among which she saw a new pair of lady's skates. "I rode into Raybourne to get these for you before breakfast this morning, and have been looking forward to the pleasure of teaching you. Now confess you are very ungrateful."

"It is very kind of you; but, indeed, I don't like to come on now, for I have refused John already."

"Nonsense; that is no reason why you should refuse me. Come now; I will take care of you. Won't you trust me?"

He was looking into her eyes so pleadingly, that she felt she could not resist any longer, and said, "Yes, if you really wish it, and I sha'n't spoil your sport."

"Of course I really wish it. Don't you know that it will afford me more pleasure than all the skating in the world?"

"But if I fall?" she said, evading a reply to his last question.

"You won't if you trust yourself to me. I will hold you quite firmly. So give me the other hand too,"—having put on her skates and helped her to rise. "Now strike out firmly and boldly. I won't let you fall."

He held her firmly in his powerful grasp, guiding her footsteps, giving her every now and then an admonishing word.

After a time she grew quite bold, and relying implicitly on his support, allowed herself to move swiftly and smoothly along at his side. The keen air and rapid motion brought a delicate color to her cheeks, and caused her dark glowing eyes to sparkle with enjoyment.

"There, now! are you not glad you allowed yourself to be persuaded?" he asked, as, after a few turns, she began to fall in with his step.

"You are not afraid now, are you?"

"Oh, no; I feel perfectly safe."

"And happy?"—interrogatively.

"Yes, and happy,"—laughing. "It's a glorious sensation to go so swiftly through the air."

"Will you try it alone?"—mischievously.

"Oh, no; please don't leave me. I should be quite helpless."

"Don't be afraid. I don't think I would let you go if you wanted to."

"I don't want to now," she said decidedly.

"I am sure I should be like Mr. Winkle if you did, and want to dash my head on to the ice."

"Hullo, Sutre!—we want you to complete a

set," called out one of the skaters, who had been performing wonders in the fancy style. "Come on, there's a good fellow!"

"Go," said Ida; "I will rest. Please don't stay," as he hesitated while the call for him was renewed.

"I shall come back soon," he said. "Try to get on with this chair; it will help you wonderfully."

She followed his advice, and was astonished at her own progress, but found it much duller than when skating with a companion. Therefore she was not sorry when Mr. Challoner came up to her and said, "You would not give me the pleasure of teaching you, but I hope you won't deny me that of skating with you;" and offering her his hand, led her away to a less frequented spot, where they were able to have it all to themselves.

"What a splendid man Mr. Challoner is!" said Miss Ramsden, who had been one of the figure-skaters. "He is a thoroughly good specimen of the muscular Christian, and seems to be enjoying himself as thoroughly as though he looked on it as a duty. I see he is teaching Miss Weston."

Dugan Sutre, whom she was addressing, looked toward the pair with no great urbanity.

"She might have waited for me," he reflected, "when she begged me to go."

"They get on splendidly together," she continued. "I hope no one will intrude on their ground."

This was only a suggestion; but it was so skillfully introduced, that it had the desired effect. Constance had been watching her opportunity.

"That accounts for her anxiety to get rid of me; but she sha'n't have it all to herself. I will not allow any woman to play fast and loose with me!"

He was moving off in their direction, when Constance said, "Will you kindly take my skates off? I strained my foot at lawn-tennis in the summer, and it is still rather weak. I am afraid I must give over skating for today."

There was no help for it but to comply, and he knelt down to fulfill her behest, murmuring a few words of condolence.

"Thank you," in her sweetest tone. "I am sorry to trouble you, but I am so lame that I can scarcely walk, and must ask you to give me your arm up to the house."

"With pleasure,"—feeling that he should like to strangle her for falling lame so inopportunely.

Ida waited in vain for him to return, and a heavy feeling of disappointment suddenly clouded all her sunshine and mirth as she caught sight of him walking up to the house in company with Miss Ramsden.

"He might have let me know, at any rate," she said. "It is very rude, after asking me to wait for him."

The frost continued for some days, and the skaters continued to assemble to make the most of it, and much was the innocent pleasure derived from the healthy pastime.

Many a tale began there which would run through the changing scenes of the lives of those who now, hand in hand, gave themselves up to the enjoyment of the hour.

Finding how well they kept together on the ice, they conceived the notion of continuing the experiment through their more serious occupations.

Among these young careless people were Herbert Horton and Mabel Challoner.

Day after day the young fellow came over and learnt to forget the dangerous fascination of Constance Ramsden in the gentle, unsophisticated charms of the country maiden.

Dugan Sutre looked on at this little by-play with the keenest satisfaction, and could not forbear congratulating Horton, who had been his "chum" at college, whom he really regarded with great affection.

"So it is quite off with the old love, Herbert, old fellow?" he said, one day.

Herbert colored like a girl, and said, "Don't

talk of that, Dugan. When I think of Mabel I feel ashamed to remember what a fool I have been."

"Miss Ramsden would not feel herself very flattered if she heard you just now."

"I have no wish to disparage her. On the contrary, I still admire her very much; but what I feel ashamed of is, that I mistook my admiration for love."

"It was something very like it, old boy, so I don't wonder at your mistake. But, at any rate, I wish you luck this time."

"Thanks! I suppose we shall soon have to congratulate each other."

The time passed tolerably happily for Dugan Sutre. Although he was daily becoming more devotedly attached to Ida, and allowed his jealous fears to listen to every prompting of a rival, yet, on the whole, he was pretty well satisfied that she understood him and returned his affection.

When she joined the party he felt perfectly secure, but as she was often absent either with her aunt or cousin John, who, although never intruding his companionship on her, contrived to monopolize a good deal of her attention, Constance had many an opportunity of inflicting a wound on Mr. Sutre's *amour-propre*.

On New Year's Eve there was to be a grand ball at the Castle, and on the following day, if the frost broke up, an expedition on horseback.

"I wish you could ride," her cousin said; "then you might have gone too."

"I wish I could," she responded, "but I shall have plenty of fun in watching the others go and return."

That was one of her great charms—the pleasure which she always experienced in simply witnessing the joy of others.

As John Challoner reflected on her sweet, sympathetic nature, he could not but feel what a help she could be to him in his parish work.

Nor was John Challoner a hypocrite even to himself. He did not try to think that he wanted only to win the heart of his cousin because she would make him a suitable wife; but recognized that she had wound herself into his very being, so that a warm, passionate love thrilled through his heart, and stirred every fiber of his nature with a deep yearning to possess her for his own.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WOOING O'T.

"How well Miss Weston looks to-night!" remarked Herbert Horton as the Rectory party entered the ball-room. "She will be quite a loss when she leaves us—that is, if she is allowed to do so!"

"What do you mean?" asked Dugan Sutre, his eyes fixed upon the girlish form, with its loose garment of soft embroidered silk. "Miss Weston is free to do as she chooses."

"But perhaps she may prefer to give up her liberty, and it isn't very difficult to see that some one is quite ready to ask her to do so. I am awfully glad, for John Challoner is a thoroughly good fellow, and deserves a good wife."

"You are a little bit unreasonable, I think, on that head," said Dugan. "You seem to think that every one, like yourself, is intent on matrimonial purposes."

"Wait and see," returned the other, with assurance. "It's as clear as daylight that he is smitten, and I can't help thinking that she is not heart-whole. Look what an interest she takes in his parish!"

This was quite true; and as Dugan Sutre could not very well deny the fact, he preferred to let the conversation drop.

But he was fated to hear more of the matter that evening, for no sooner had he escaped from Herbert Horton than his mother bore down on him, and motioning him to her side, said: "Dugan, I think it would be well for you to pay Constance more attention. You have neglected her shamefully; and, considering all things, the notice that you have bestowed on Miss Weston is rather too marked."

"That is a matter, mother, on which I feel

myself to be the most competent person to judge," he said, decisively. "I have no intention of paying Constance Ramsden any particular attention."

"You must forget all that has passed when you say so," she said, with hauteur.

"Not at all. I know you are desirous of an engagement between her and myself; but grieved as I am to thwart your wishes, such a thing can never be."

"It must be. Your honor as a gentleman demands that you shall not draw back now."

"I have considered that matter, and have decided that my honor would be more compromised by proceeding than withdrawing from the affair."

"You must be mad, Dugan!" she said. "And although I have no intention of working on your feelings, I must own that I had thought my wishes would have been of more moment with you. If you are uncompromised, remember I am not."

"Mother, let us drop the subject. I should be sorry if it be the cause of alienating us, but you must allow me to judge for myself."

"If it is your acquaintance with Miss Weston which has worked this change, I shall be still sorrier, Dugan," she said, gently. "For believe me, dear boy, she does not care for you. I verily believe she is almost engaged to her cousin; and I know dear Mrs. Challoner's heart is fixed upon the match. You have no right to supplant your friend, and especially such a friend as John Challoner."

"It is no question of supplanting," he said, calmly. "Miss Weston has the right of choosing for herself."

"Is it fair to put her to such a test? You must know that in such a matter you and John are unequally matched. I believe her to be a good and pure girl, but can scarcely believe she would resign such a position as would be hers as your wife for that of an obscure country parson's."

Dugan made no answer, but a hideous train of reflections filled his mind.

"But no," he said, vehemently, to himself, "I will not be so blind, nor will I slander her so even in thought! Such a base suspicion shall not sever me from the only woman whom I have ever cared to win! I will know to-night what my fate is to be, and something tells me that I have not much to fear. I do believe she loves me."

"Have you saved me a dance?" he asked, going up to her a few moments later. "Let me look."

And he held out his hand for her programme.

His face darkened as he saw all but one place filled up.

"Am I only to have one?" he asked.

"I could not know how many you expected," she said, slightly injured. "Everybody else has been asking me, and you might have been engaged."

"Did you not know that I should leave myself free for you? I don't think you have quite kept to our compact; unless," he added, jealously, "you prefer to dance with some one else."

"I do not prefer to dance with any one else," she said, quietly. "But I had no right to expect you to dance with me; and as you did not come, I concluded you did not wish to do so."

In spite of the quietness of her tone, he saw that she was hurt, and that something had been suggested to her which was raising a barrier between them.

"How can you think that I prefer to dance with any one to you?" he asked, reproachfully.

"Ida, do not let any one suggest that to you. I cannot say more now, but let me have that dance, at any rate, and then you must listen to what I have to tell you. I cannot keep silence any longer, although I believe my secret is no secret from you."

As he placed the programme again in her hands, his fingers for one moment closed over hers, sending a thrill of passionate emotion

through her soul, and making that scene which, a few moments before had seemed so incomparably dull, a paradise to her.

A few moments later, her next partner came to claim his dance, and she was led away through the whirls of the mazy waltz, listening and answering mechanically to his uninteresting small-talk, while Dugan's words, "I believe my secret is no secret from you," were ringing in her ears, and she was trying to think how she should answer that appeal which she felt he was going to make to her.

Their dance was nearly at the end, and it seemed ages to her before they got to it.

At last it came, and with a strange medley of emotions she saw him approach to claim it.

"We will take one turn first," he whispered, and the next moment his arm was round her, and his hand clasped hers, and she felt that never before in her life had she known the full poetry of existence when two souls move together in perfect unison, in feeling and in action.

"Come, my darling," he whispered; "I cannot do without you any longer,"—leading the way to the conservatory. "We shall be alone and you must hear my appeal."

She trembled violently, and dared not look up, even though she felt his arm pressing her closer to his bosom, and knew—ah, so well!—the passionate love was streaming eloquently from his eyes.

"Sweetest, you love me," he said, softly. "Is it not so? I have not been mistaken in you. Tell me, my darling, that I may hope that you will be mine. I know I have seemed jealous and exacting to you. Forgive me, and believe that it was my great love for you that made me so jealous of my own happiness. I was afraid that you did not return my love; and yet I have loved you since the first moment I saw you, as I have never till now, nor ever can again love another woman. Ida, will you not answer me? Don't reject me, my darling, for life would be torture without your love."

He was bending so fondly over her, and trying to look into the sweet dark eyes for some response to his passionate pleading. With a powerful effort, she gained control over herself, and raising her eyes, looked into his face with a glad, radiant happiness which told him all that he needed.

"I knew it," he whispered, rapturously—"I knew that you would not play me false. Oh, my darling, you do really love me, and me alone?"

"Yes, you, and you alone," she repeated so softly that he had to bend quite down to catch the words. "But I cannot realize it all. I never knew till now that it was so."

"It shall be my one aim to make it a reality, my precious one; and such a reality that it shall surpass all ideality, as you surpass all other women."

He caught her again in his arms, and showered passionate kisses upon her lovely face, murmuring such words of passion as only a man of deep affections can utter at such a moment, and she listened to him with the fullest sense of security and confidence in his protestations.

The rustle of a dress aroused them from their intoxication of joy, and they had scarcely time to recover their composure ere Miss Ramsden and her partner in the late dance appeared, the former exclaiming, "Ah, there you are, Miss Weston! I hope you are enjoying the evening. What a pity that you cannot join our party to-morrow."

How differently Ida thought of that ride now!

She would have been glad had the skating continued, for then she would have spent the joyous hours gliding at his side, their hands locked together, and listening to the story of which she felt she should never tire—the story of his love.

Now she knew that he would be obliged to leave her, and she hated the sport which would call him away from her side.

"I trust the weather will be pleasant, then we shall have a delightful drive," continued Miss Ramsden. "I hope Frisket is in good form."

"The only danger will be that she may be too lively after her long rest," answered Mr. Sutre.

"I am not afraid. We have always been such good friends, and after you have had her so well trained, it would be a pity to miss the opportunity of putting her good qualities to the test."

She stayed there until Ida's partner, John Challoner, came to fetch her away.

Ida did not see Dugan again until they were leaving, and then a soft voice whispered in her ear as she looked round for her cloak, "Let me help you, my own!" And she suffered him to wrap her up tenderly, and felt that it must be some glorious dream as he walked by her side to the carriage awaiting her party.

There he held her for a moment by the hand until the others had come up; and, printing one hasty, passionate kiss on her upturned brow, whispered, "Until to-morrow, love! I can scarcely let you go!"

The music of his voice was still in her ears, his kiss still warm on her brow; and the voices of her companions seemed a strange sort of accompaniment to the refrain of the glad song which her heart was repeating—"He loves me—he loves me!"

But suddenly and strangely the accompaniment seemed to predominate, and her own refrain to cease, as she listened with strained attention to the careless chatter of the rest of the party.

"I never saw Miss Ramsden look more beautiful than she did to-night; but I must say that, little as I like to find fault with Dugan, he does not pay her proper attention," remarked Mrs. Challoner.

"I don't believe he cares for her a bit," said Mabel, confidently. "Do you, Ida?"

"I—I really don't know," said Ida, trembling, with a sickening, foreboding fear. "I did not know they were engaged."

"Nor are they!" said Jack Challoner, in his quietly authoritative way, which he always adopted when he did not approve of the style of conversation.

"It is a pity for people to settle the business of others for them!"

"But, John, every one knows that it is to be. Mrs. Sutre has made no secret of her wishes on the subject; and unless she had Dugan's sanction, she would scarcely have invited Miss Ramsden there."

"It is not true!—it is not true!" cried Ida, passionately, to herself, as she fled to the little room which had been her mother's, and bolted herself in.

"He said he loved me, and he cannot be false! Oh, Dugan, be true to me! I cannot do without you now! Mother! mother! oh, that you were alive, that I might tell you all now! Watch over me, mother; guide me to that which is right. Oh, do not leave me!"

She walked distractedly up and down, trying to regain composure, until, at last wearied out, she sunk down by the side of the bed, and it seemed to her over-wrought mind that the spirit of the mother whom she had never known was really with her.

A sweet sense of reassurance gradually asserted itself, and she said:

"I will not believe it! He said he loved me, and surely I can trust him more than any one else. Oh, my darling! I will be patient, and it will all come right, I know."

Thus comforting herself, and pressing the flowers he had given her to her lips, she fell into the quiet, health-bringing sleep which only comes to the young and buoyant.

Little, ah! little did she deem what the next few years had in store for her!

CHAPTER V.

THE RIFT IN THE LUTE.

MISS RAMSDEN'S wish was verified. The sun was shining brilliantly, and there was no

sign of storm when, the morning following the ball, the riders assembled at Sutre Terrace.

Ida had resolutely put away all the hideous doubts which had tormented her last night; her cheek was flushed with joyous hopes, and she nodded cheerily to Mabel, who looked sweetly pretty on her little chestnut horse, and was of course attended by her ever-devoted cavalier, Herbert Horton.

A pang of jealousy shot through Ida's heart.

"How I wish I could ride!" she said. "He would have been with me then."

Just then Mr. Sutre rode up, side by side with Miss Ramsden, looking anxious, gently touching her rein.

He did not see Ida at first, and the misery of last night began to return to her.

"What if he really does love her?" she thought. "What chance can I have! She is so lovely, and every way more suitable for him. But, then, why, oh why did he try to win my love, and tell me that he loved me? I will believe him until he himself undeceives me, no matter what the world may say!"

Mr. Sutre was speaking earnestly to his companion, and Ida heard him say:

"I wish you would ride something else to-day. I have an uncomfortable sensation respecting Frisket; she seems so very fresh."

"All the better," she responded, patting the neck of her graceful but high-spirited steed caressingly. "It is very kind of you to trouble about me, but I feel perfectly secure."

He gave up the attempt to persuade her, and turned his horse's head to the spot where John Challoner had drawn up, looking, however, still very quiet and serious.

He felt to a certain degree responsible for the danger to which he knew Miss Ramsden was exposing herself, since Frisket was of his own choice and recommendation; he having had her expressly trained for a lady in the days before he had known Ida, and when he had thought it possible that he might one day present it as a gift to Constance, who was a consummate horsewoman.

But he shook off the feeling of gloom as he took Ida's hand in his.

As their eyes met she felt reassured. She saw the same passionate, tender glance in his which had thrilled her last night.

"You are not going to-day, John?" he remarked. "Neither should I be if it weren't that mother wishes me to take the lead in helping to entertain her guests."

Ida felt the explanation was meant for her, and smiled gratefully, as she said, "I am afraid I am the cause of John's inactivity to-day. He has kindly given up his own pleasure to bring me here, as I cannot ride, and wanted to see you start off."

"We shall soon teach you to ride, if you stay among us," said John. "Meanwhile, I am only too glad to have the opportunity of giving you any pleasure."

"Thanks! Don't you agree with me that that would be charming?" turning to Mr. Sutre.

"It would be more charming to me were I in John's place and he in mine," he returned in a low whisper, bending as near to her as he could. "Would you be contented with the change?"

A beautiful blush and tremulous smile gave him the answer he needed, and with a slight pressure of her little gloved hand he whispered, "I know I can trust you, my darling."

"And I, you," she thought, as he was called away from her side.

A few minutes after they were off, and Ida felt a certain blank as she saw him ride away with a group of ladies and gentlemen.

"We will drive along here," said John. "They are going to take the river road, and we will drive through the village and meet them on their return route."

The fresh wind blew in her face, giving it a slight rosy tinge, and she smiled with eagerness and excitement, keeping still one figure ever in view.

John was gratified at her evident pleasure, and said, "I think we could manage to make

this place very agreeable to you if you stayed with us, Ida. Should you be afraid of being dull?"

"Oh, no!" And a blush spread over her down-cast features as she reflected upon the probability of her being there for a great part of her life.

The blush, however, was quite misunderstood by John, and his heart swelled with happy hopefulness for the future. He would fain have said more, but the utter unconsciousness of her expression told him that any declaration on his part at that time would be premature, and he possessed his soul in patience thinking that the time surely would come, and soon, when he could speak without fear the words which burned in his heart.

"How I wish papa were here," she cried, as they bowled merrily along. "He would enjoy it immensely! It is good of you, John, to give me such a treat. I feel that I am quite depriving you of your own pleasure."

"Yes, it is enjoyable," he said. "But still, I would rather be here. I would rather be with you, Ida, than anywhere else in the world!"

An uncomfortable tremor came over her as she realized the drift of his words, and she hastened to change the subject.

After all they failed to meet the party, which had probably decided to return by a more circuitous route, so they set their faces homeward, reaching the Rectory a little before luncheon time.

"A letter for you, Ida," said Mrs. Challoner, as her niece entered the drawing-room. Bennett brought it from Raybourne about an hour ago. I think it is from your father, and hope it is to prolong your visit."

"Thanks, auntie dear; that can scarcely be, although I have enjoyed myself so much. I am quite miserable at the thought of going, ungrateful as it seems to poor papa."

And she reproached herself as she reflected how little thought she had bestowed on her distant father in his loneliness.

"I am afraid my happiness has made me selfish," she thought, breaking the seal of her letter. "Poor papa! I will not be so wicked as to feel sorry at returning to you, and yet it is all so different. I cannot bear the thought of living our old life."

But these thoughts vanished as she read her father's letter, while her remorse increased.

"Well, darling, what does he say?" asked Mrs. Challoner. "I hope that he will come and fetch you, or at any rate allow you to prolong your visit."

"Oh, no, auntie, I am sorry that it is neither,"—her heart growing sick with a foreboding of she scarcely knew what. "He is unwell, and would like me to return on Thursday."

"If he is unwell, he would do much better to come down here and try a little rest and change of scene."

Ida did not answer at first, but throwing her arms round Mrs. Challoner's neck, she sobbed bitterly.

"My darling, what is this?" cried her aunt, in alarm. "Surely you have no ill news? May I read your letter, dear?"

"Oh, yes; but you will not understand!" cried the girl, her lips quivering with sorrow, and her beautiful eyes full of tears. "Oh, I have been selfish and cruel to leave him so long, and to be so happy while he was alone!"

"My dear, I cannot see what reason you have to reproach yourself," smoothing the young brow fondly, and speaking reassuringly. "Your father was obliged to leave you, and would, I am sure, have been very grieved had you spent all your time in mourning for him. He simply says he is a little indisposed, and will be glad to have his little nurse."

"You do not know papa as I do," said Ida. "He would not have complained even as little as that had he not felt very ill. I know that he is always afraid that he will not live long, although he tries to hide his anxiety from me; and now he will not come down here because—oh, because he wants to finish his work before the end!"

And a fresh burst of sobs convulsed her frame.

"Believe me, dearest, this is too gloomy a view to take of your father's letter. He has been a delicate man for years, but that need not make you anxious. Such men often live much longer than those who are more robust."

"I know it may seem extravagant to you," she replied; "but papa must be very ill to complain, and I know he would come down here had he not some weighty reason. The night before I came away we had a long talk, and he spoke then for the first time of his fear of never being able to finish his book, although it is so near completion. That is what he refers to when he says that he has much to accomplish in a short time, and dare not take a holiday now."

"Well, I hope you are wrong, dear child; but if it be that there are grounds for your fear, remember that you have always friends here who will sympathize in your troubles as though they were our own."

"Thanks, dear auntie! You make me feel what it would have been to have a mother!"

"I would be one to you if you would let me, darling."

Ida crimsoned, for the words recalled John's in the dog-cart that morning, and she could not answer, nor look into the calm, affectionate eyes which she felt were looking into hers so searchingly.

"Oh, if they but knew!" she thought. "I cannot bear to deceive them for a moment!"

"Why, what is the matter?" asked John himself, coming in at that moment. "Are you in trouble, Ida?"—tenderly taking her hand in his.

"Yes, cousin John,"—hastily, but not unkindly, withdrawing the hand which she felt it was almost sacrilege to let him touch. "Papa is ill, and I feel anxious about him."

"I am very grieved to hear it,"—in his own grave way. "Will he not come down to us, and let us see what our country air will do for him?"

"Oh, no, I think not. He returns from Cuba on Wednesday, and wishes me to return on Thursday."

"Then we shall only have you two days longer! Oh, we cannot let you go so soon!"

"But I must, indeed," she returned. "I could not leave papa alone."

"But surely he will come down here if you write how sorry we shall all be to lose you? And you would be very sorry to go—eh, Ida?"

"Yes,"—in a low, troubled voice, as she remembered what she would leave behind her.

And for the second time that day John misunderstood her, and felt that perhaps her grief might have been more for the prospect of leaving than at the illness of Mr. Weston, which he imagined not to be very serious.

If only Mrs. Challoner had not been there, he would have spoken out then and there, much as he feared to alarm Ida by a too hasty declaration of his love for her.

As it was, he only said, "I am glad you regret to leave us. Rest assured we shall not be happy till we have you again among us; shall we, mother?"

"No, indeed, John. I think Ida knows how precious she has become to us during her short stay."

And then, fearing that she would rather be impeding the progress of matters by her presence, she opportunely remembered some household affairs which required supervision, and retired, saying, "You must comfort the poor child, John; I leave her in your hands."

This consummate generalship was, however, doomed to be frustrated, for Ida had scarcely time to realize the awkwardness of her predicament than a cry of distress was heard outside in the distance.

She ran to the window, looked in the direction from whence the cry came, and her attention was quickly drawn to a horse which was tearing down the road at a terrible pace.

Her heart sickened as she recognized both horse and rider; it was Constance Ramsden,

and even to Ida's unpracticed eye it was evident that Frisket was rapidly getting beyond all control. She was rearing and plunging frantically, resisting all efforts to force or persuade her to quiet down into a moderate pace.

Suddenly she wheeled straight round, and came thundering along toward the Rectory garden, which was separated by a hedge from the street.

At that moment, Ida saw that some one had perceived Miss Ramsden's dilemma, and was coming to her assistance, and her heart beat painfully with agonized attention as she saw it was Dugan.

"Oh, will he be able to save her?" she cried. "Hasten, oh, hasten, or she will be killed! She—she cannot hold her any longer! Merciful Heaven, it is too dreadful!"

John had rushed out, and was making his way, bareheaded, to the spot; but it seemed that he could not reach it in time.

All took place so quickly that it seemed but the work of a moment for the mare to rush frantically toward the hedge, and, rising rapidly, take it with a high leap, her exhausted rider dropping like a stone from the saddle onto the gravel path below.

Ida covered her face with her hands for a moment, and turned sick with fear at the horrible sight; but resolutely recovering her self-command, stepped quickly through the casement, and made her way to the prostrate form, whose awful stillness thrilled her with terror.

"Oh, dear, is she dead? And I almost hated her this morning!"

But quick as she had been, she had scarcely time to bend over the form of Constance and place her hand on the heart to find that she was still living, when Mr. Sutre came up, looking stern and awful in his anxiety.

"Is she dead?" he cried. "Would to Heaven I had never left her or let her ride that accursed beast!"

"She is alive, and only fainting," said Ida, calmly. "Will you not bring her into the house, and then we can see what injuries she has received? Can you and John carry her, or shall I get a stretcher?"

She shuddered with horror at the thought.

"We can carry her, I think," said John. "I hope she has sustained no serious injury beyond a severe shaking."

"I will take her," said Mr. Sutre, firmly setting his teeth. "If she is vitally injured, I am her murderer, for I was a fool to have left her. I knew she could not manage the animal."

He lifted the unconscious form in his arms, and a faint groan burst from Constance's pallid lips; but as her eyes opened for an instant, and she looked on her bearer, a faint smile played round her mouth, and she murmured, "Thank you, I am not much hurt."

They took her up at once to a large spare bedroom on the first floor, and laid her on the bed, while Mrs. Challoner hastened in, and, assisted by Ida, administered the proper restoratives.

The patient soon recovered consciousness, and they were able to ascertain to a certain extent the injuries she had received. Beyond a dreadful giddiness she complained of no bodily hurt until she tried to move her left arm, when the pain she experienced caused her to utter a sharp cry.

Its swollen and inflamed condition convinced them that it must be either dislocated or fractured, but they felt thankful that nothing more serious had occurred, and Ida went at once to tell Mr. Sutre, who was impatiently waiting below.

She was quite calm, but a dreadful pallor revealed the awful struggle which was going on in her own breast.

Those passionate words of his, uttered in a moment of unguarded excitement, seemed to have darkened all her own life.

"It is true," she murmured; "he loves her as they say, and I am only his plaything to amuse him for a time, and then to be thrown away."

How can I bear it! And now I must speak to him as though nothing had happened between us."

John Challoner was in the room and her pride came to her rescue. At least no one but herself should be conscious of her suffering, and last of all he who had caused it.

"How is she?" cried Mr. Sutre, coming forward.

"She is better now; we begin to hope that the only injury is a broken arm, but of course we cannot be certain until the doctor comes. Mrs. Challoner asked me to come and relieve your anxiety, but I must return at once, as Miss Ramsden seems to like me to stay there."

"That is not necessary, if she is better," he said. "You must not over tire yourself."

"Does he fear to leave us together?" she thought, bitterly. "He need not; his secret is safe enough with me. I have no wish to proclaim to the world my folly in believing all the sweet words of the first man who made love to me!" But she only said aloud:

"I am not afraid of fatigue, and aunt will need help."

"Will she not be able to be moved?" he asked.

"I will send the carriage at once, or we can even carry her on the couch."

"Oh, that is not at all necessary," she answered. "Miss Ramsden prefers remaining here and after her fall it will be better for her to keep quite quiet."

"Thank Heaven, it is nothing worse," he said fervently. "Oh, Ida, I feared she was dead."

She drew back haughtily as he uttered her name, but he scarcely noticed the action in the growing dusk, and continued:

"I could never have forgiven myself had it been so. Can you spare me a few moments, and I will tell you why?"

John had quitted the room, and they were alone.

A momentary relenting softened her heart toward him, but she steeled herself, saying inwardly:

"No, no, better not; I dare not trust myself to him again."

"I must return," she said aloud. "When the doctor comes we will send you word."

And she was going to leave him when he intercepted her.

"And have you nothing further to say to me, and this the first time we have been alone to-day?" he asked, pleadingly.

"What should I say, but ask you to forget all that I have ever said before, as I mean to try to forget you."

"Ida, what is this madness? Explain what you mean, or I will not let you go."

"How can you ask?" she said—"you who know all that has passed between us!"

"And would you recall it?" he asked, trying to take her hand again in his. "Surely, my darling, you do not regret so soon? Would you really unsay all you said last night?"

"What would be the use of unsaying it if I cannot unthink it?" she said, sadly. "Oh, Mr. Sutre, I would that I had never seen you! And yet I was so happy!"

"What have they been saying to you, my own?" he cried, drawing the graceful dark head to his breast, and kissing her passionately. "Will you let anything come between us? My child, if you play me false, I shall lose all faith in womankind."

"Dugan, if you really love me, nothing shall part us. But, tell me, is it not true that you are to marry Miss Ramsden? I would not believe it until I saw your grief when you thought she was dead, but then I could not believe in you any longer."

"I thought your love was stronger," he said. "Surely it is natural that a man should be moved when he sees a woman in such a condition without being madly in love with her, and especially when he feels that the accident is in great part owing to him?"

"Oh, forgive me, Dugan, my love! I see I was wrong. But, indeed, I have suffered, and I should not have thought this had I not heard so much before."

"I forgive you, my sweet; but remember you must trust me more than this. I cannot be contented with your love unless I also have your confidence."

"You have it indeed, Dugan. I will never waver again in my belief in your love."

"That is right; and now, sweetest, listen, and I will tell you why I reproached myself for Constance's unfortunate accident."

"Oh, no; please don't. We will forget her entirely and efface her from our life."

"Unfortunately, darling, we cannot do so. There is a great deal that I must confess and which will try your faith to the utmost. Only you must believe in me, my darling, spite of all. I love you, and you alone. Remember that: and now, sweet one, listen."

"Ida, dear, I am sorry to trouble you," said Mrs. Challoner, suddenly interrupting their *tete-a-tete*, "but our invalid keeps calling for you, and seems to be getting quite restless and excited. Can you come to her?"

"Oh, yes; I will come at once. Good-by for the present," giving her hand to Mr. Sutre, and whispering. "You must tell me another time. I can wait now that I am sure of your love."

CHAPTER VI.

DISENCHANTMENT.

CONSTANCE RAMSDEN was tossing restlessly about on her pillows when Ida entered and stood quietly at the bedside, firmly but kindly making her lie still and compose herself.

"You are a good little creature," said the invalid, with one of her most bewitching smiles. "You will nurse me, won't you? I feel that I can't bear any one else to touch me."

"I shall be glad to do all I can," said Ida, gently, and feeling truly that she would, now that horrible jealousy had left her. "But you must really obey orders or you will make yourself ill. Now you are to try and sleep till the doctor comes to set your arm. I am afraid there is nearly an hour to wait."

"You will stay, then? I am such an awful coward, I could not bear it unless you stay near."

"I won't leave you again," said Ida. "See, I am going to write a letter to my father, and I will do it beside your bed while you sleep."

Reassured by her presence Miss Ramsden really did remain quiet, although the intense pain of her arm prevented her from sleeping.

She bore the operation of setting the bone with much more fortitude than might have been expected from her protestations.

When it was all over and the evening was far advanced, she called Ida to her side, saying, "I have rested a long while now, so you must let me have a good talk. When I tell you what an eventful day this has been you won't wonder at my being rather excited. I am going to make you my confidante—may I? You know I never had a sister; but if I had I think I should have wished her to be like you."

"It is very kind of you to say so," said Ida, yet feeling almost embarrassed at such unwonted gushing protestations of friendship.

"Come and sit on the side of the bed," said she. And Ida did so, with a strange fear and distrust of the smiling, beautiful face in her heart. "Sit where I can see you. Oh, Ida—I may call you Ida, may I not?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Ida, although you may think it is very unpleasant to be thrown from one's horse, and to have one's arm broken, do you know I think I am the happiest girl in the world; and if it had all to come over again, I would not have it different, not even if the pain were to be much more severe!"

"No?" interrogatively. "I should not like to see it all over again. It was an awful sight."

Constance laughed.

"Were you very frightened? I think I was, too, a little bit; but oh, Ida, when I opened my eyes I felt quite safe! How could it be

otherwise, when he was carrying me, and I knew he had hurried to my help?"

Ida's breath came quickly, and her fingers interlaced each other with painful tremulousness; but she dared not trust herself to speak.

"You must not think me unmaidenly to tell you this, dear," continued Miss Ramsden, and each word was like a dagger-thrust in her heart. "Of course you know, as every one else does, of my intended marriage with Mr. Sutre; and you will understand how I love him, for you are his friend, and it is for that reason that I like to confide in you. But until to-day I have always had a fear that the marriage was partly one of convenience on his side, and that he was actuated by no warmer feelings than esteem and a sense of the suitability of the match; but when he bent over me so tenderly and passionately, I saw how I had wronged him, and that he really did love me as I love him. Now do you wonder that I am thankful for my accident?"

"I—I do not know. I did not know you were engaged. No one has told me."

"Have they not? Well, it has not been publicly announced, but both of our families are quite aware of it, and are delighted. It is to be made public as soon as I return. But you will congratulate me now, dear Ida, I know."

"I hope you will be very happy," said Ida, bewildered, scarcely daring to trust herself to speak, as the horrible truth flashed across her.

This was what he wished to explain, then—that he was engaged to Constance Ramsden, although his heart was hers; and then the recollection that in all his protestations he had never asked her to become his wife occurred to her mind, burning into it with torturing vividness.

"What did he take me for?" she groaned inwardly. "Oh, Dugan, how could you wrong me so?"

Every trace of color left her set face, and she sat with clinched hands while Constance continued her confidences.

"I knew you would be glad for our sakes. Dear little Ida! I hope we shall see a lot of you. Come, won't you return my confidence? Do you think I have been so engrossed with my own affairs as not to notice yours?"

"I have nothing to confide," said Ida, calmly.

"Nothing? What would John say if he heard you?"

"I should be very sorry for him to do so. There is nothing between us at all, and I am surprised that you should think there is."

"Ah, I see; you will not tell me! But I know all about it, and shall not give up the notion of having you quite near, to be my friend always. We shall form quite a devoted quartette. Can you not imagine it?"

Ida laughed bitterly.

"I'm afraid I cannot; my imagination is not quite so vivid as yours, Miss Ramsden."

"Please don't call me by that formal name. I am Constance to you. But I think I must rest now, Ida; I am getting very tired."

That was one relief, at any rate; and as she, in fact, after the lapse of an hour or more, really dropped off into a light doze, Ida was able to withdraw from the room, and summoning some one to take her place, to retire to the privacy of her own, there to try and shape her future course of action.

She did not weep. The burning, dry eyes showed a grief too deep to find vent in tears, and she felt a stony indifference was creeping over her, stupefying and numbing every sensibility except that of acute mental agony.

"Oh, for utter annihilation!" she moaned. "To vanish body and soul from this earth, and to be as one who had never been!"

One thing was certain—she dared not see him. Under no condition whatever dared she trust herself to the fascination of that winning, tender voice, which had seemed like music to her only a few short hours before. She shuddered as she thought of his influence over her.

"My love, my love! I thought you a king among men, and you thought me—oh, heaven,

that I must own it—one of the vilest of women! Why have I given you cause to humiliate me so? Oh, that you had never told me of your love, nor asked for mine! But I could not help it—I must have loved you!”

There was still one day more to be spent at the rectory, and it was the fear of what she should have to undergo during those few hours which filled her with such terror.

“No one must know,” she cried; “and how can I let him know that all is at an end forever between us?—that I will never see or speak to him again? I dare not—I dare not!”

Toward morning she lay down on the bed in order to disarm suspicion, but no sleep came to her relief, and she felt that she would never sleep or rest again.

“Thank heaven, I cannot go on long like this. Death must soon come to my relief. Nature cannot endure it.”

Every one noticed her pallid cheeks and heavy eyes at the breakfast-table, but fortunately it was put down to over-fatigue, and she was peremptorily ordered to absent herself from the sick-room for that day—a command she was quite ready to obey, although Miss Ramsden had expressed a wish to see her.

“It is not at all necessary,” said Mrs. Challoner. “Miss Constance is much better, and her mother wishes her to return to Sutre Terrace to-day. Besides, I cannot let you overtire yourself the last day, and return home ill to your father. You must go back looking quite bonny and cheerful, or he will think we have not made you happy.”

“No fear of that, dear auntie. I shall tell him of the good friends I have made down here.”

“And that you want to come back to us?” said Mabel.

Ida's eyes fell.

“That cannot be just yet,” she said. “You must come and see me in New York.”

“Can it really not be that you will return to us?” said John Challoner, a few moments later, when he found himself standing alone with Ida.

He was speaking very quietly, but as she raised her eyes to his face she saw that the moment was come, and that the words he was going to address to her would be the outcome of as true and honest a love as ever any man offered a girl.

And then came an awful temptation, which seemed to offer a way of escape.

How could she better convince Dugan Sutre of the cruel injury he had done her than by engaging herself to John?

She would not deceive him; she would tell him that her heart was no longer hers to bestow, only reserving the name of him who had betrayed her.

Yet if he should take her as she was, why should she refuse to make his life happy?

It was an awful moment.

The beating of her heart was almost audible as she rapidly thought of what she should do.

“It will be safer,” she thought; “but how can I? How can I give myself to any other man now? I dare not do it.”

John was quietly watching the struggle which showed itself so plainly in her face, and gently taking her listless hand in his, said:

“I love you very dearly, Ida! Can you be my wife?”

“Oh, that he had put the question differently—if he had said ‘Will you be my wife?’”

Could she be his wife with that awful secret weighing on her mind?

“I fear you do not love me as I love you,” he said; “but, darling, I will try to win your love as my wife. It shall be my pride to shield you from every ill, to make your life as sunny and happy as it is possible. Will you trust me with it, darling?”

“I would rather trust you, John, than any one else; but I dare not do it. If you knew, you would not ask me.”

“My darling, I could not know anything

but what is good and pure of you—nothing but what I should care for in my wife! Come to me, dearest, and you shall never, never repent it. I will teach you to love me!”

“You cannot, dear John, teach me to love you more than I do now; but yet I cannot love you in the way you mean.”

“Will you not try, Ida? I cannot do without you. Tell me, dear, are you not unhappy? You seemed once the brightest and gayest of all, and yet now it seems that you are sad. May I not know? Give me, dearest, the right to share and soothe all your sorrows.”

It was a temptation, and yet she shrunk from it with inexpressible dread.

How could she yield herself up to him when her every thought was devoted to that other man, whom it was sin even to think of? Still, she knew she would be safe in his keeping, and he looked at her with such yearning in his deep gray eyes that she could not doubt the sincerity of his love.

“John,” she said, brokenly, “will you take me for your wife when I tell you that I have no heart to give—that my love has all gone out to another man, of whom I dare not even think?”

He sunk down upon the sofa beside her, and encircled her in his strong arm, his touch thrilling her with horror.

“My own, I will take you anyhow. But tell me, who is the person that has dared to trifle with you? Is it really beyond all hope?”

“Never speak of it,” she said, shuddering. “I cannot even tell you his name.”

“Do I know him?”

“No.”

It was the first lie Ida had ever told, and she loathed herself as it passed her lips.

“I dare not let him know,” she moaned inwardly.

“Thank God!” said John. “I feared I knew; but I know you would not deceive me, Ida. My poor, poor darling, I had not pictured our betrothment thus. To make you happy I would even now relinquish you. Tell me can I do nothing?”

“Nothing!”—with an awful stillness which seemed almost like death creeping over every nerve.

“Then at least I will try and make amends by my own devotion; and, Ida, you will try to love me, won't you?”

“Yes, I will try.”

But she shuddered as he drew her white face to him, and kissed it passionately again and again.

Oh, God! and the kisses that that other had printed there seemed yet warm, and his words were still ringing in her ears.

“May I tell my mother, or will you?” said he.

“You do it, if you please,” she said faintly.

“And, darling, I shall go with you to New York to-morrow, and then I can speak to your father.”

To New York! Ah, it was not yet a fortnight since that memorable journey when she had met Dugan for the first time! Surely it must be a hideous dream, and she would awaken soon to find herself alone with her father, contented in his love, and his alone.

CHAPTER VII.

THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION.

MRS. CHALLONER was sitting alone in the drawing-room, reflecting with intense satisfaction on the news that her son had just confided to her, and looked an even heartier welcome than usual when Mr. Sutre made his appearance, coming in, as usual, without waiting to be announced.

“How is the invalid?” he asked.

“Oh, decidedly better! She has passed a good night, and is sleeping quietly now.”

“And the nurse? I hope she is not very fatigued.”

“I am afraid she was quite worn out, she looked so pale and weary; so I have forbidden her the sick-room to-day. It would not do for her to return looking ill.”

“I hope we are not to lose Miss Weston yet,” he said.

“Did you not know she returns to town to-morrow? Her father wrote yesterday.”

“No; I did not know. Can I not see her?”

“She has gone out with John”—looking a little surprised at his request—“to say good-by to some of her village friends. Perhaps I should not say ‘good-by,’ though, as she returns, I hope, very shortly to us.”

And a pleased look of importance shone in the kind, motherly face.

“Then this call to the city is quite sudden, I presume, as you expect her to return so quickly?”

“Oh, no; we did not dare to hope for a long visit this time. But when I talk of returning, I mean that dear Ida has promised to return to us for good.”

Mr. Sutre looked mystified, and asked an explanation.

“I know you will be so glad to hear of John's happiness”—with the blind love of the mother which, dwelling with delight on the joy of her boy, ignores, or rather does not even know, the agony which that same joy is inflicting on her hearer—“that I cannot help telling you of it, though, of course, the matter cannot be looked upon as finally settled until he has spoken to my brother-in-law.”

“What do you mean? For Heaven's sake, tell me quickly, and let me know on what piece of good fortune I am to congratulate him?”

Mrs. Challoner did at last notice that something was wrong; but thinking that perhaps Mr. Sutre might have been attracted to Ida as to any other beautiful girl, and only so far touched as to grudge for the time being to any one else what he could never have for himself, she continued:

“Ida has engaged herself to John; he has been with me telling me all about it.”

“Ida! Miss Weston engaged! You must be mistaken, Mrs. Challoner. The thing is absurd!”

“I see no absurdity in it,” with quiet dignity. “John is in every way a suitable husband, and I am not at all surprised. Indeed I may tell you I have expected it ever since Ida has been here. It was quite plain to see how things were going.”

“Pardon me,” recollecting himself, “I did not intend to hint that John was not a fit person to gain Miss Weston's heart, but I was surprised, for I had some reason to think such a thing could not be true. Can I see her? I suppose my adieux and congratulations must be paid together,” with a bitter smile as he reflected on the inconstancy of women.

“A shameless jilt! But she shall not escape me thus! I will force an explanation from her!” he thought, burning with indignation.

“She is out now”—in answer to his question—“and I scarcely know when they will be back. At such a time even the sternest housekeepers are obliged to make allowances.”

“I will go to meet them,” he said. “And I shall be able to speak to both, then. Good-by, Mrs. Challoner.”

“Good-by.” Reflecting with considerable uneasiness on his manner as the door closed behind him, “I'm afraid he must have cared for her too; and if so, that accounts for his inattention to Miss Ramsden. But of course such a thing could not be, even had he gained our dear Ida's heart. His people would never have countenanced such a marriage, and she and my John are made for each other; but I am sorry for poor Dugan.”

While good Mrs. Challoner was hugging to herself these comfortable reflections poor Dugan was moodily striding toward the village, scarcely conscious of his purpose in doing so, but vaguely resolving to find out Ida and upbraid her for her fickleness.

“I will never see her again,” he said to himself. “And I would have sworn that she was faithful and true! Ida, I could pray that lovely face of yours might be marred forever,

so that you might never again lure men to their destruction as you have lured me! As you answered me so sweetly and tenderly, how could I believe that it was all acting? I could not now, were it not for your own act proving your treachery to me!"

It would have been more comprehensible had she, by relinquishing her engagement to him, made a better one in a worldly point of view. That would have been only in accordance with the experience he had gained in the ways of the world; although it would nevertheless have utterly blasted all his confidence in her simplicity and purity. But it was not so. In choosing to unite her lot with that of John Challoner she was condemning herself to a life of comparative poverty. And bitter as such a conviction was, Dugan Sutre gradually allowed himself to be convinced that her worldliness had been shown when she had accepted his attentions, and had promised him her hand while her heart was given to John Challoner, and that her love had now triumphed over her worldly wisdom.

"Then, when I thought her the simplest-minded of women, she must have been acting a part, and dissembling every look and word while she strove for the prize of—how can I even think it? it is too horrible!—of becoming the mistress of Sutre Terrace. But *what* an actress she must be! If ever I could have sworn that love was written on a face, it was on hers that night when I asked her to be mine. *Ida, Ida! can you not clear yourself? Can you not again be the pure, angel-like woman I thought you?*"

But he was too deeply stung to be able to give way to tender feelings; and his one thought now was that of resentment and contempt for the woman who had duped him.

He had not gone far into the village before he caught sight of her and John going into one of the cottages, and saw that she had noticed him by the sudden way in which she turned round and began talking to her companion.

"I will wait outside here," he reflected, "until they come out. John Challoner's friend should be the first to congratulate him on the bride he has won for himself."

The cottage was a corner one, surrounded on both sides by a garden; and he waited there for more than half an hour, but still the visitors did not appear.

At length, growing impatient, he knocked at the door and asked of the woman who opened it if Mr. Challoner were there.

"He was here about a quarter of an hour ago," answered the woman, "with the young lady—Heaven bless her, and him, too!—but they went in to see Lucy Wright, next door."

"I did not see them come out, and have been outside some time."

"No, sir; they didn't go out that way. There is a gate leads into Lucy's from my back garden, and Miss Weston asked to go that way to save time."

She had avoided him, then.

Small wonder that she feared to meet him in the presence of her *fiancee*.

He thanked the woman and retraced his steps toward the Rectory. "She shall not escape me without some explanation. I *will* see her," he resolved.

When he arrived at the Rectory he found Constance up and ready to depart. She met him with a bright smile, and said, sweetly, "You see I have been punished for not taking your advice. Another time I shall have to allow you to judge for me."

"We may be thankful the results were not more serious," he said. "I trust you do not feel very much shaken?"

"Oh, no, thank you; and I had such a dear little nurse! I told her I should have to tell you all about it, especially as from the way matters have turned out since, I cannot think she can have had much heart for nursing. You have heard the news, of course?"

"Yes," he said hoarsely. "I suppose it will soon be known everywhere."

"I hope so," she laughed. "Ida looks so de-

lightfully happy—lovelier, if possible, than ever. But I am chattering on, and have never even thanked you for coming to my assistance yesterday. Believe me," giving him her hand, "I am grateful. When I saw you coming after me, somehow I felt that it would be all right, although a moment before, I was horribly frightened."

"I wish I had been in time to prevent your falling," he said. "I reproached myself for having given way to you in the first instance."

"Thank you,"—gratefully. "It was all my own fault, so I will not hear of your making yourself unhappy about it."

"I will not, since I see you looking so well again." He turned wearily away, unable to feel any interest in the subject, remembering the grief it had seemed to give to Ida.

"And was that acting, too?" he thought. "Yes; she looks happier and lovelier now than ever!"

"Miss Weston is going away, I understand, to-morrow," he said, turning to Mabel. "I should like to say good-by to her, if she is in."

"She is up-stairs," said Mabel. "I will go and fetch her." And she left him alone with Miss Ramsden.

He did not speak, for his whole thoughts were engrossed with the expected meeting.

It was not, however, destined to take place, for soon Mabel returned with an excuse from Ida, to the effect that she was very fatigued, and was just lying down. She therefore commissioned her cousin to say good-by in her name.

"If she does not see me now, I will see her at the station to-morrow," he reflected. "I must and will see her once again. Fool, fool that I am! I hunger for one glance at that lovely face, before I forget it forever!"

In spite of her excuse to Mabel, Ida was far from resting. No sooner had the door closed than she rose from the bed, and getting her writing materials, set about the difficult task of writing to Mr. Sutre.

"It must be done," she reflected; "but how?—that is the question. I dare not reproach him for fear that he should come to try and justify himself, and that must never be. I dare not, cannot see him."

Many, many were the attempts she made, but each production seemed worse than the former.

"How can I appear not to mind at all, when it is killing me?" she cried. "Dugan, my love—my love! how can I relinquish you, when I really believe you do love me? Would not your love satisfy every longing?"

She recoiled with horror from herself at the hideous thought, and covered her face—blanched and drawn with mute misery—with the hot, trembling hands. The one thought that brought relief was that of her speedy departure. Then at least she would be far from the place where she had experienced the greatest happiness and the greatest misery of her life; and then, too, she would be parted from John.

Already the burden she had laid on herself had become almost insupportable, and she loathed even the sound of his voice. It was useless to reproach herself with ingratitude, for she could not school herself to bear his caress or fond words.

At last, after many attempts, the note was written, and placed in the post-bag; and then she felt the relief of knowing that what she had done was quite irrevocable.

"I wonder if he knows yet about John?" she thought. "If so, oh, grant that he may understand me! I cannot bear that he should think I was false when I vowed to love him, though I wish now I had never done so."

Dugan Sutre received the note with a packet of others the next morning at the breakfast-table. Instinct told him who was the sender, and he abruptly left the room, in order to look at its contents in solitude. They were very brief, and ran as follows:—

"MR. SUTRE:—

"You will, without any further explanation, I feel sure, understand from all that has taken place since our last meeting that any return to our former relations is impossible. I wish to forget all that you ever said to me, as I hope you may forget that you said it. I trust we may *never* meet again; at any rate, it must not be for years, until the past is quite forgotten. That you may be very happy is the wish of

"Yours faithfully, "IDA WESTON."

"What can she mean? Surely she must have some sense of shame for her broken faith? And yet not one word of excuse from beginning to end—merely a cold wish that I may be happy, when she has taken every opportunity to blast my whole life! *Ida Weston, we shall meet before many years; this very day we shall meet, and then look me in the face and repeat that wish if you dare!*"

As Ida and John drove up to the station, the thought that the first and last time she had been there was the occasion of her meeting Mr. Sutre, made the place seem cruelly familiar to her.

"I shall remember the very spot where he stood. It seems that he will ever be associated with it," she thought to herself. "It was just in the doorway leading to—*Merciful Heaven!*" as a tall, well-knit figure appeared standing on the very spot where she had first seen him. "He is there! Be still—be still!"—to her throbbing heart. "Oh, that the train would start at once, and take me miles away! I dare not see him!"

But, with a cruel, quiet smile, he came toward her, and she knew that the meeting was inevitable.

"It is unmanly," she said to herself.

"She does not look so happy now," he reflected, as her deadly pale face appeared in the doorway. "I thought she could scarcely brazen it out to my face. Thank heaven, she dare not look at me!"

"Good-morning, Miss Weston," he said, raising his hat with stately politeness. "As you would not give me the opportunity of saying farewell, I was obliged to make one."

She murmured something about thanks for the trouble, her eyes bent on the ground and her lips quivering painfully.

John was getting the tickets, and although she feared to be alone for a moment with Mr. Sutre, she felt glad that he was not there to witness her emotion.

"Trouble!" he echoed. "Do you think"—with a cruelly sarcastic smile—"do you think that I should feel any trouble in performing the pleasant duty of congratulating you on your engagement? The pleasure almost counteracts the sorrow I might feel at your departure. Allow me to wish you every happiness and a *long* and *fortunate* engagement."

At his cruel, mocking words a flush of pride dyed her usually pale cheek, and raising her beautiful eyes, she looked him steadily in the face, saying:

"Your wishes are likely to be fulfilled, if I am but worthy of the good man who has chosen me for his wife. Allow me to reciprocate your congratulations."

And with a stately bow she swept past him to the waiting train.

Fortunately, she had a few moments before John joined her to regain her self-command. She cowered back in a corner of the carriage, crying:

"Oh, that I were dead! Cruel, cruel to insult me so! How could he speak so to me! I could not have treated him thus, and Heaven knows that the wrong is on his side!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ALL OVER.

MR. WESTON was at the depot to meet his daughter, and it did not need a second glance from her loving, observing eye to see that something was amiss with him. It was not only that he looked worse in health, but there was a dreamy sadness in his manner which

told her that some unwonted trouble was perplexing him.

It was sweet balm to her wounded spirit to feel herself again under his protection.

"Oh that I had never left you!" she thought as she looked into the deep-sunken brown eyes, and noticed the lines which had seemed to grow deeper during her absence.

But he seemed well contented to have his darling back, and sat with her small hand locked in his, as John told him the story of his love, and asked for his consent to his union with Ida.

"And what does my pet say?" said the old man, tenderly kissing the broad brow nestled so confidently on his shoulder. "Are you willing to go, Ida?"

"Ah, papa, I never want to leave you."

"Tut, tut, child; I did not mean that. I could not expect to keep my little bird forever, and I am thankful that she should find another protector before I have to leave her. What I meant was, are you willing to fulfill this engagement with John?"

"Yes, papa," very faintly, and shrinking as John took her hand in his, and thanked her again.

"Then if John, after he has heard what I have to say, is still willing to keep to his part, there is nothing which could have given me more satisfaction. But you must first listen to me."

"My dear sir," began John, "nothing could make me alter."

"Nevertheless, hear me. I do not think it will make you alter, but it is fair you should know. Ida, my dear, the little fortune I had hoped to leave you, and which would have made you independent, is lost to us forever. I regret that you can bring no gift but yourself to your husband."

"Can you think for a moment that anything further is needed?" said John, impetuously.

"My Ida, believe me that I would rather have you by yourself than burdened with any fortune whatever."

"I do believe it, John," she said. "Nor would I wrong your generosity by even suspecting you of feeling any regret; but tell me, dear papa, does not this also mean a change in your fortune? Will you too be quite poor?"

"Yes, child, for the short time that I remain on earth. It is not a long story. You know that a claim was raised on our little estate. I went to investigate this claim, and soon found out enough to convince my own mind that it was a well-founded one, although one which I do not think could have been established in a court of law. Of course there was but one course open to me, and that was—"

"To resign your own claim at once," said Ida, promptly. "My dear, noble father, you could not be guilty of anything approaching dishonorable conduct: but I cannot leave you now. John, you would not ask me to leave papa now that he is poor?"

"My dearest, I will not ask you to leave him. Our home will always be open to him. I hope he will make it his own."

"Thank you, dear children," said Mr. Weston, much moved. "I shall be but a short time longer here, and during that time I shall be as much with you as I can."

"What do you mean, papa?" cried Ida, with vague dread.

"I mean, my darling, that soon I shall be taken from you forever. I have, at the longest, only a few months to live; it may be less. Were it not quite certain, I would not have told you; but I would not have it come suddenly upon you."

"Oh, papa! papa! I cannot do without you! Do not go away and leave me!"

"My darling, I shall leave you to a better protector than I could have been. You will have your husband."

"But that will not be you. Papa, take me with you, if you must die. I cannot live without you!"

And utterly unstrung by the long hours of

suffering she had undergone, she burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"Ida," said John, reproachfully, "you are only adding to your father's grief. It must be hard enough for him already. Try to be calm."

"I will," she said, bravely, laying her head closer to that fond breast. "But, papa, you will not let me leave you now. I will work for you now, as you have done all these years for me, and then, perhaps, if you have perfect rest, you will get quite strong again."

"That cannot be," he said, firmly. "I can never recover; and, my darling, I am only too glad that you will now have no necessity to work. It was that thought alone which im-bittered my poverty."

"But I am not afraid. I can teach—and—and sing. Let me do this for you while you live."

"But what will John say?" asked Mr. Weston.

"John will not expect me to come to him while you need me," she said. "Is it not so?" turning to her lover.

"Darling, you know how I need you, but I will not try to persuade you to act against your conscience."

"Thank you; I knew you would say so."

When John was going away the next day, he said, looking fondly down into the beautiful face which was so dear to him:

"Mind, my darling, I trust to you to send for me directly you are in any trouble. I would that I could stay with you, but my duties call me home. But you promise, Ida?"

"I promise, John."

"And you will try to love me, Ida?"

"I do love you, John, and will try to love you as you love me."

Then she submitted to his embraces, and tried not to shrink from the pressure of his lips on her brow.

"Dugan—Dugan!" she moaned, "oh, that I could forget you! And papa must go too! Oh, that I might die also!"

As so often happens, a very quiet time followed the stormy period of Ida Weston's life which we have followed.

She had little difficulty in procuring music pupils, as her great talent was well known, and her father had several influential friends in musical circles.

She had also every chance of achieving success if she had really wished to sing professionally.

She worked hard, grateful for the occupation, and the fatigue which it brought diverted, to a certain extent, her mind from its overwhelming sorrow.

As the spring came on, Mr. Weston grew gradually but surely worse, and before March had fairly set in he was unable to leave the house at all.

Ida was his constant companion in her moments of leisure, and tended him with that devotion which one pays when one feels that the object of it will soon be beyond all our cares.

She received long letters from Raybourne, both from John and Mabel; but it was seldom that the name which still thrilled her every nerve was mentioned.

At last, however, a letter came, and as she read the cruel, cruel words the last ray of hope died out of her heart, and she felt herself reduced to utter despair.

"It was quite true, then!" she moaned. "Oh, Dugan, until now there has always been a doubt that Constance Ramsden might have told me an untruth. But now I cannot doubt for a moment. It was all too true!"

It was a long letter from Mabel, announcing her own engagement to Herbert Horton.

She wrote very enthusiastically, and concluded as follows:

"Raybourne seems generally intent on matrimonial purposes. Firstly, there was John; secondly, there is our little affair; and, lastly, but not least, Dugan Sutra's engagement to Miss Ramsden is at last announced."

"Of course there has been an understanding be-

tween them for some time past, and the wedding is to take place very soon—the first week after Easter, I believe."

Then the letter went on to describe and discuss the usual wedding *trousseau*, bridesmaids' dresses, etc.; but those had no interest for Ida.

She was sitting, almost stupefied with grief and hopeless misery, when a low call from the adjoining room summoned her to her father's side.

Then, with an heroic effort, crushing remorselessly all her bitter thoughts, she succeeded, while attending to the wants of her parent, in bringing a smile to his weary, wasted features.

Quietly and deftly she moved about the sick-chamber (Mr. Weston had been confined to his room for several days now), but few would have recognized in the dark hollow-eyed girl the beautiful winsome creature who had stood by his side on that platform little more than two months ago.

"Ida, my darling," said her father, faintly, "do you think John will be able to come up again soon?"

"Not before Easter, papa dear, unless you want him very much. He is engaged, I know, at present."

"Easter will do, dear. I shall linger, I hope, until then, Ida. My little Ida, you have been a good daughter, and I grieve to leave you; but remember, child—as I am sure you will—that I have done the best I could for you. I know you have never had a mother's love and a mother's care, and your life, therefore, has been rendered less joyous and happy than it might otherwise have been. But when I am gone do not forget me; and try to think, too, of your mother, whom I hope soon to join."

Ida did not weep. She, numbed by her misery, clasped the wasted fingers of her father more tightly, and exclaimed, "Oh, papa! oh, that I might die, too, and go and see my mother!"

"Nay, nay! You have many happy days to remain on earth. You are too young, too beautiful to die!"

"Mother was beautiful, too, and not much older, was she not?"

"But would you leave John as your mother left me? Believe me, my darling, had it been so ordained, my sweet girl-wife would have willingly remained to tread life's path hand in hand with me."

From that day he grew rapidly worse, and would talk more and more confidently of the home he was going to, until Ida felt as if her heart would break. The end came very soon.

It was a terrible day to Ida, for it was the same as fixed for the marriage of Dugan Sutra to Constance.

Mrs. Challoner and John were both with Ida, and showed her every kindness and attention; but when all was over, and her aunt pitifully led her away from the lifeless body, she entirely collapsed, and fell into a deathlike swoon which lasted for hours.

The funeral over, Ida felt like one utterly deserted, and her heart failed as she thought of one more awful interview that she had to undergo.

From the tumultuous state of her own heart, she was now convinced that she could not become the wife of John Challoner.

The love which she bore to Dugan Sutra was too deeply ingrafted into her nature for her to be able to root it out, and she knew that she would be doing wrong to marry any one else.

And Raybourne of all places was that she most shrunk from in the world.

How could she take up her residence in a place where there would be constant opportunities of meeting him and witnessing the happiness of his wedded life with Constance Ramsden?

"I could not bear it!" she moaned. "I would drive me mad! I should do something desperate!"

She knew that both her aunt and John wished her to return at once with them, and to have

a good rest at the Rectory, and be quietly married in the late summer or autumn.

She must, therefore, speak at once; and much as she dreaded the duty, she determined to discharge it that very evening.

John himself furnished the opportunity by saying, as he stroked back the dark hair from her weary face, "My darling, we shall have to bring back some sunlight to your life. You must not allow yourself to be cast down too much with sorrow at what has passed. Remember that your father may be much happier now than he ever could have been on earth."

"I do remember, dear John, and though the parting is very sad, I will not grieve for him; but for myself, I cannot help it. I have lost all!"

"Not all, darling! A home awaits you where you shall find that life has still much happiness in store for you."

"John, John, forgive me for what I am going to say!" she cried, passionately, her face working with intense feeling. "I cannot come to Raybourne!"

"Not come to Raybourne! Why, my darling? You cannot stay here alone, and you know that we must return. If you would rather wait a few days, or even weeks, mother will wait with you; but I think the change will do you good."

"Oh, you do not understand! I mean I can never come to Raybourne at all, John! I can never be your wife!"

"Ida, what is this?"—a marble stillness coming over the strong face.

"How can I tell you? But I must—I must! John, you have been very, very good to me, but I cannot love you, and it would be wicked in me to marry you in those circumstances."

"Ida, we will not talk of that yet. Only come down to Raybourne and rest. You are unstrung now, and incapable of coming to a correct conclusion on this matter."

"I cannot come to Raybourne!" she reiterated. "John, I once told you a lie."

"Ida, Ida, spare yourself and me!" he cried, with an awful foreboding of what was coming.

"I dare not. When you asked me if you knew the man who had won my heart, I said, 'No.' But you do, for it was Mr. Sutre!"

"My child, my child, what can I do for you?"

"Nothing. Oh, John, it was wicked of me to deceive you, but I could not let you know, it was so awful! I loved him so much, and he wronged me so cruelly. I loved him then, and I love him now too dearly ever to love any other man, or to trust myself to be near him. Now you must see that I cannot, dare not go to Raybourne, where I should see not only him, but also his wife, constantly."

The great anguish which she saw in his face apprised her of the sorrow she was inflicting.

"John," she said, "I can never atone for the injury I have done you. I hardly dare even ask your forgiveness; but, believe me, the present pain, acute though it be, is better than lifelong unhappiness. I would to Heaven I could love you as I do Dugan Sutre!"

"My darling, my darling!" he murmured passionately. "And I can do nothing for you! I cannot even shield you from the troubles and anxieties of your everyday life!"

"Never mind that, dear John. I have no fear for the future. Little aches and pains do good by distracting attention from the greater evils which almost kill one."

"But, my darling, how will you live?"

"I must be independent,"—trying to speak bravely. "I can earn enough to support myself in comfort, and I shall live with my old music-teacher, Miss Bonner."

A sigh broke from John as he saw how clearly she had planned it all.

"How eager she must be," he thought, "to escape from him!"

Her quick intuition revealed his thoughts to her, and she said, "Do not think I am ungrateful, John. Miss Bonner came yesterday to propose what I have told you, not knowing that you wished me to go to Raybourne."

"And is this to be the end?" he said, sadly.

"It must. Oh, John, I have brought much trouble into your life! Believe me, dear cousin, I would do almost anything to undo it, and that when I promised to be your wife I meant to do my utmost to be a true one."

"I know it, darling. I grieve more for you than for myself. Heaven forgive me, but the man who has wrecked your life is a villain, and I hope that he may one day reap the fruit of his villainy!"

"Oh, hush, hush! I was wrong, too. I ought to have known that such a thing could never be. Promise me that you will not let his treatment of me alter your relations with him."

"I will promise I will never allude to the matter; but do not ask anything further. I could not give such a promise."

She sighed wearily.

"Oh, Heavens! what a fate is mine! To ruin one man's life, and to blight a life-long friendship! John, can you ever forgive me?"

"Forgive! I have nothing to forgive. It is I who should ask forgiveness for forcing my love on you when it was torturing you to death."

"Don't say that, John! Sometimes it was very sweet, only I could not bear the thought of marriage. Love me still, John, as a brother!"

"I shall love you ever, Ida; but not as a brother, although I will try to act a brother's part toward you. If ever I can serve you, send for me at once; and—and—oh, Ida! if you ever change, do not fear to tell me. I will make you my wife whenever you choose to confer upon me that privilege."

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER DARKNESS, DAWN.

Two years have nearly passed away, and Ida Weston has worked hard, having resolved that her life should not be entirely ruined by her earlier troubles.

She is already well known in her profession, and is spoken of as sure of achieving the first success.

No one who hears that full, rich voice can fail to be thrilled by it, any more than they can help being spellbound by the wonderful beauty of the singer.

She hears often from Raybourne—not from John, but from Mabel, who is Mrs. Horton now—and from Mrs. Challoner; and the former, not knowing the reason of the breaking off of the engagement between her brother and cousin, often chats of the Raybourne family.

But little is seen of Dugan Sutre now. He is generally abroad, and very seldom accompanied by his wife.

Mabel writes that there is a decided estrangement between them.

"How can it be?" Ida would reflect. "I know she loved him. Surely she has never found out about me?"

She is going to sing that night at a large musical reception, and on her way there her thoughts are busy with Mabel's letter.

The reception is held in a large suite of rooms, the pianoforte being in the furthest one.

In the middle one, behind a screen, is standing listlessly, looking with wearied indifference at the brilliant crowd, a familiar form. It is that of Mr. Sutre.

Suddenly his indifference gives place to earnest attention.

He listens with heart and soul to a voice which he knows full well.

He could not mistake it, for the words are poured forth passionately, as though from the singer's very heart:

"Who knows the time when we shall meet,

Or if we ever meet again?

Who knows will it be sad or sweet,

With happy hearts or hopeless pain?

'Tis better we should be apart,

For while the barrier lies between,

We could not bear to meet, sweetheart,

Nor dare to be as we have been.

The shadows fall, the long years wane,

Who knows if we shall meet again?"

"Who knows if I shall e'er be free?

Will it be soon or come too late?

No voice replies to you or me;

We can but hope, and trust, and wait.

And love, in pity for our tears,

And sweet atonement for the past,

Maybe, maybe, in after years

Shall let our pathways meet at last!"

"It is she!" he cried; and, starting from his quiet retreat, he walked into the adjoining room, where Ida Weston had just finished her song amidst a burst of applause.

She turned visibly paler as he confronted her.

"Do you remember me?" he asked, bowing.

"Perfectly!" she answered, returning the salute; and she turned round and commenced a conversation with her neighbor, her bosom heaving with painful excitement.

Fortunately it was her last song, and she was soon able to take her leave.

As she stood in the hall waiting for her attendant, he came up to her.

"I must see you. Let me call on you," he said.

"'Tis better not," she answered. "I am sorry we have met, and would rather that we should never do so again."

"Do not be cruel," he said. "We have both suffered. I feel sure that there has been some awful misunderstanding between us."

"At any rate it is irrevocable," she answered, "and only harm can come of our meeting."

"Do not fear me," he said. "I will not reproach you, Ida, though my life is very bitter. But at any rate I must know what induced you to throw over John Challoner, too, after you had accepted him at such cost to me."

Just then Ida's maid appeared, and she would not stay.

"Good-night," she said. "I thought you would have understood it all. I accepted him to show you I was not what you thought me, and I broke my engagement because I found he was too noble to be sacrificed like that."

"Is it possible, then, that you really loved me?" he cried.

"How could you doubt it? But I will not say more," she returned.

"But you owe me an explanation, and I shall claim it," he replied, eagerly.

"Good-night." And she walked away.

Did she dread or long for the interview? She scarcely knew. It would be sweet to know that he had really loved her truly and honorably; and yet, with that barrier between them, what good could they reap from such a meeting?

But come what might, it was inevitable.

There had been a look on Dugan's face which told her that she must bend to his will, and she felt that she could not settle to any of her wonted occupations with that strange unrest in her soul.

"What will he say? What shall I do?" she kept asking herself every moment.

But she had not to wait long.

Very soon after breakfast had been removed he was announced.

Fortunately Miss Bonner had business which called her out early, and Ida was sitting alone when he arrived.

She stood up to receive him, and he came straight up to her, and taking her two hands in his, looked down intently into the beautiful yet sad face.

"There cannot be untruth in you," he said at length. "Ida, tell me all! You did not deceive me, I feel sure; then let me know what madness possessed you to sever two hearts formed for each other as ours were?"

"Madness," she echoed, sorrowfully. "Would it not have been madder to have kept to my word when it would have been destruction to us both?"

"I do not understand you. Before Heaven, Ida, you are speaking in riddles to me."

"What right had you to seek my love while—while your hand was promised to Constance Ramsden?"

"It is false!" he cried. "Who has dared to hint such vile treachery to you?"

"Was it not true? Oh, Heaven, what have I done?"

"What, indeed!" he echoed, bitterly. "Oh, Ida, why did you not trust me? And I had only just assured you of my love!"

"But you had not asked me to be your wife."

"Was not asking for your love the same thing? Ida, how could you think I would wrong you so?"

"I would not think it at first," she said. "But afterward I was told so certainly, and you had just spoken so strangely about her, that it seemed so clear. Ah, that I had given you my reason then."

And for the first time since this trouble had come upon her, her grief found vent in a passionate storm of tears.

She could not help it.

He had taken her in his arms, and strained her passionately to his breast; and, man as he was, his own eyes were filled with tears and a deep sob shook his strong frame.

"What can we do?" he cried. "Is there no way of escape from this fate?"

"None," she said. "We must part! Knowing what we do, we cannot meet as ordinary acquaintances, and we dare not meet as more!"

"Tell me one thing," he said, almost fiercely.

"What was the proof which finally convinced you?"

Her face crimsoned.

"I dare not tell you!" she faltered. "Do not ask me, Dugan!"

"Was it my wife?" he said, sternly.

"Oh, Dugan, forgive her! She loved you, and I had come between you! She may have thought, too, that a marriage with me was unsuitable for you."

"Accursed creature!" he hissed,

"Oh, Dugan, hush! She is your wife!"

"Do not remind me of that, in Heaven's name! I might have forgiven her had she not been that. Now, Ida, listen to me. I am going to put your love to a test."

She trembled with fear.

"Dugan, we must part!" she said. "Do not ask anything from me!"

"Yes, I suppose we must part; but how hard it is that we should do so! I am married to another woman, but it is not a union of souls. We are as far apart in sympathy, feeling, and everything which distinguishes and tends to increase the bliss of conjugal life as the poles are asunder. We cannot exchange confidences; nay, we cannot look each other in the face. In short, we are both utterly miserable, and, as far as I can see, we shall continue to be so until the end of one or both of our lives."

"Oh, Dugan, don't say that! Your wife loves you; try to give her, if only a little, love in return. At any rate, do not make her life a burden to her."

"Ida, it is easy to talk. Suppose you had married John—"

"Hush, Dugan! that was impossible. I have already told you that he was too noble a man to be sacrificed to pride and spite."

"Then I am the victim. To you only, Ida, my heart, my life belongs, while I am the husband of another woman!"

"Dugan, you must not pursue this matter further. What is done, is done. We have committed a sad mistake, both of us, and we are now reaping the penalty of it."

"But, Ida, dear, you do not know what I am suffering. I am united to a woman who is driving me headlong to destruction. Do you wish to see me in my grave, Ida?"

"Oh, Dugan, why can you ask me such a question? I have told you how precious you are in my sight. If it came to that, I would, oh, how willingly, give up my life for you."

"Ida, I know it; yet—"

"Stay, Dugan! We must part, and must never meet again—at least for many years. I shall go away, and oh, my love, struggle on! Let me have the happiness of knowing that you are brave and true, as I always thought

you. It will not be so hard as it has been, for now all cruel doubts are cleared away, and we know that our love was strong and true. Let that be our consolation in the future."

"You are right, my darling. But surely you will not go straight away. Let me have the happiness of knowing you to be near, and seeing you occasionally with others. I vow I will never attempt to see you alone."

"We could not keep to such a compact," she said. "And we must forget."

"Can you do that?"

"I shall try. I am going to leave America. I received an offer to do so some days ago, and now I shall accept it."

"But can I not follow you?" he asked. "These days of steam do not allow even the ocean to form an insuperable barrier."

"Yes; but I trust your own good feeling and your honor as a gentleman, will prevent your taking such a step," she said, gently but firmly.

And he who, in the old days, had been able to make her yield with a word, silently acquiesced and promised that he would not do so.

"Is it to be good-by, then?" he asked, sadly.

"Yes, Dugan; for aye, I fear."

It was an awful moment, and it seemed that life was a thing of the past for both of them—the future at least a dark, impenetrable gloom which could bring no joy to either.

Again and again he tried to go, and ever and again turned to her side for one more farewell.

At last it was over, and as she heard the street-door close behind him she fell on her knees and prayed Heaven to be merciful to her lover.

A few days later a paragraph in a paper caught Mr. Sutre's eye, and he dropped it hastily and left the breakfast-table, unable to face the wife who had been the cause of what he read there.

She picked up the paper, and read as follows:—

"Most members of the musical world will regret to hear that we are to lose, for an indefinite period, the services of one of our most promising young artistes. Miss Ida Weston has decided to go to Italy, where she will study under the famous Signor Barrelli, and where we wish her every success as would certainly attend her efforts if she stayed in the mother country."

"So she is going," reflected Mrs. Dugan Sutre. "I don't suppose it will make much difference to me. Ah, well, had I known as much then as I do now, my lord might have had his humble love. The game was not worth the candle!"

Many were the friends who assembled to see Ida off on the steamer which was to take her from America. John Challoner was there. She had told him all, and he had told her that she was acting rightly.

But the approbation of her friends scarcely made up for the miserable sinking of heart while she watched the slowly-receding shore.

"Shall I ever return?" she asked herself, sobbing quietly behind her veil.

Not for more than three years did the answer come to that question.

Her fame as a cantatrice had reached the United States before her, and she was met down New York Bay by a cutter containing her agent and a number of friends, together with a brass band, who had resolved to give her a hearty welcome to "the land of the free."

Strange the vicissitudes of fortune!

On the same ship was the relict of one of the martyred Presidents of the United States—whose husband had not only given his life for his country, but had also saved its government from total ruin—who was returning to her native land, broken down in health, poor in this world's goods, to die.

While our heroine was received with music and kindly greetings, there was no one to receive this poor woman, none to hold out to her a kindly hand!

But a *nos mouton*, as the French say. Miss

Weston on landing, was driven to the Fifth Avenue Hotel, amid the plaudits of the multitude.

On making her *debut* at the Academy of Music a few nights later, she received a perfect ovation, and the critics were unanimous in their opinions, that never since the time that Jenny Lind had visited their country had they listened to a vocalist who could so sing to the hearts of her audience.

At the close of the first season, having sung in all the principal cities of the States and Canada, she had netted a hundred thousand dollars.

Just about this time it reached the ears of Miss Weston that the health of young Mrs. Sutre was far from being in a satisfactory condition; she was subject to periodical fits of illness, which were attributed to the fall she had received from the horse, of which Miss Weston had been the unwilling witness.

But there was probably another cause, of which the world knew nothing.

Though she and her husband continued to live under one roof, and to observe outwardly the relations which the world expects should subsist between husband and wife, they were both utterly miserable.

Dugan Sutre never saw his wife unless when it was absolutely necessary, and then for as short a time as possible; hence she was often allowed to languish for weeks together at Sutre Terrace without the society of her husband or any society whatever, for even the Challoners eschewed her.

Finally, her health broke down; whether from the remorse she felt for what she had done to Miss Weston, or from neglect, or both, no one ever knew.

She was found dead in bed one morning.

This was the event which changed the current of Miss Weston's future life.

After the funeral she had received a letter from Dugan begging that she would either allow him to come to her, or that she would return to Raybourne and her friends.

For a long time she would listen to neither proposal.

She was now the possessor of an ample fortune, and received the homage of rich and poor wherever she went.

But one morning, when nearly twelve months from the date of the death of Constance had elapsed, the New York Tribune contained this announcement:

"It is with profound regret that we learn the celebrated *prima donna*, Miss Ida Weston, will bid farewell to her profession in a few weeks. The reason for this decision we can only conjecture. It is whispered that she has resigned the scepter of the lyric stage to reign as queen in one man's heart and home alone. Who the fortunate winner of such a prize may be is as yet but a matter of conjecture."

Her home-coming was very different from her departure.

Only one was there to meet her; but as she felt herself clasped in the strong manly arms, a dear, well-known voice whispered tenderly, "After much tribulation, our paths in life converge at last!"

THE END.

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